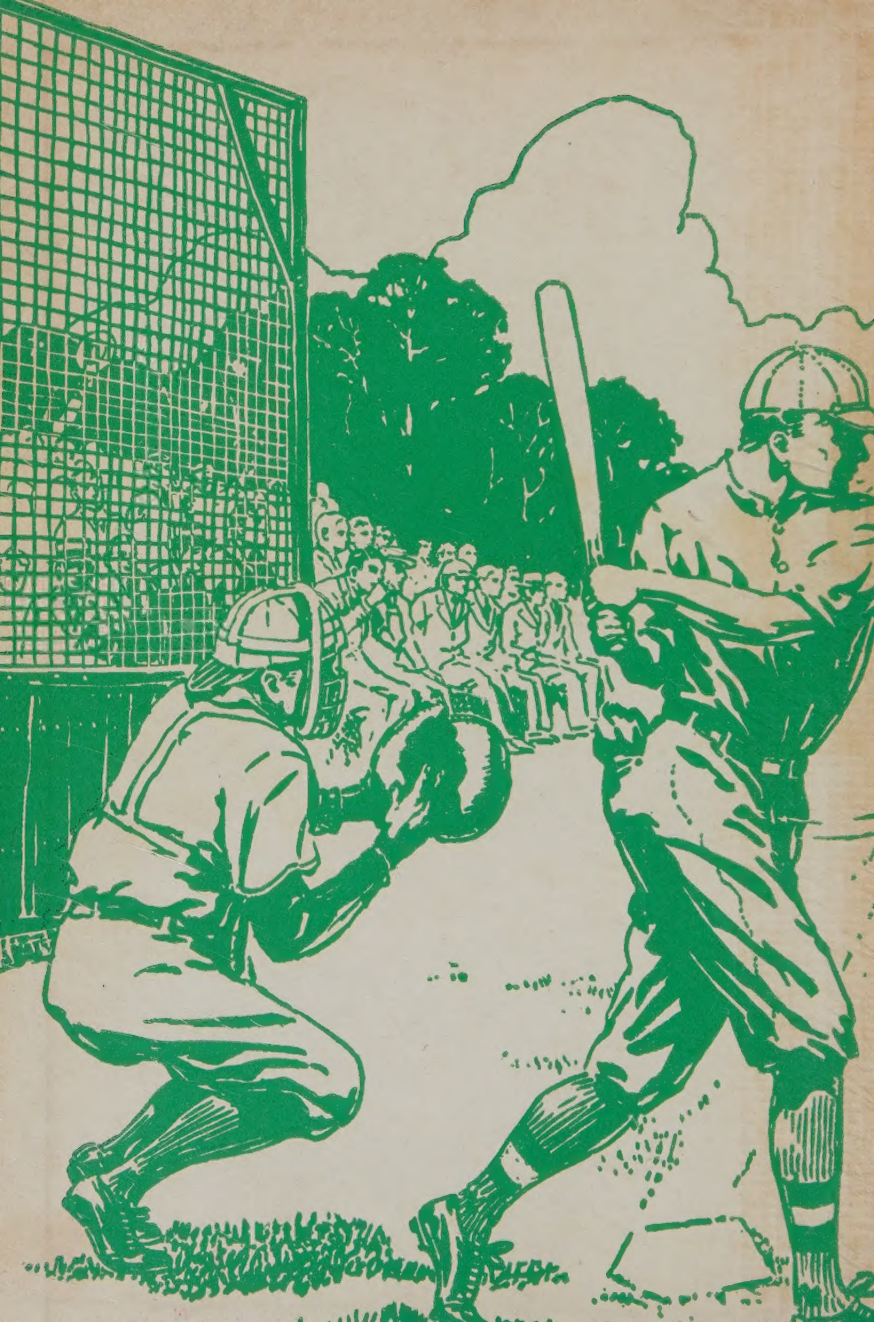
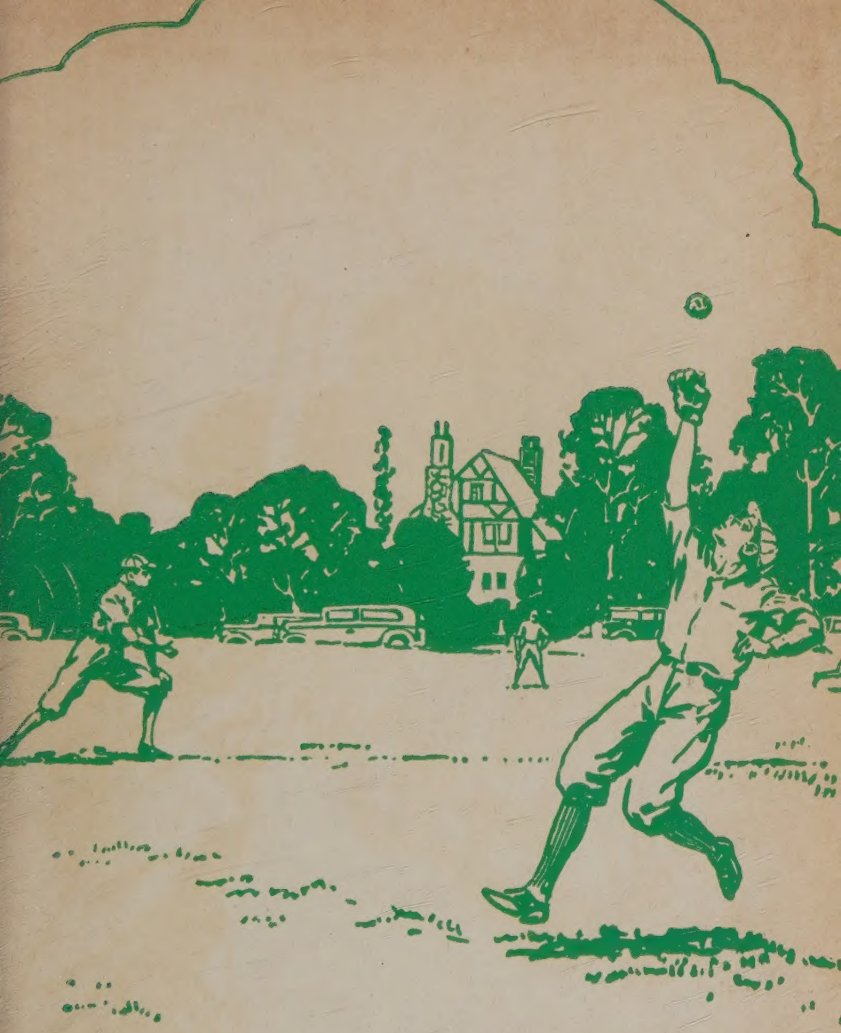
HIT BY PITCHER

HAROLD M. SHERMAN





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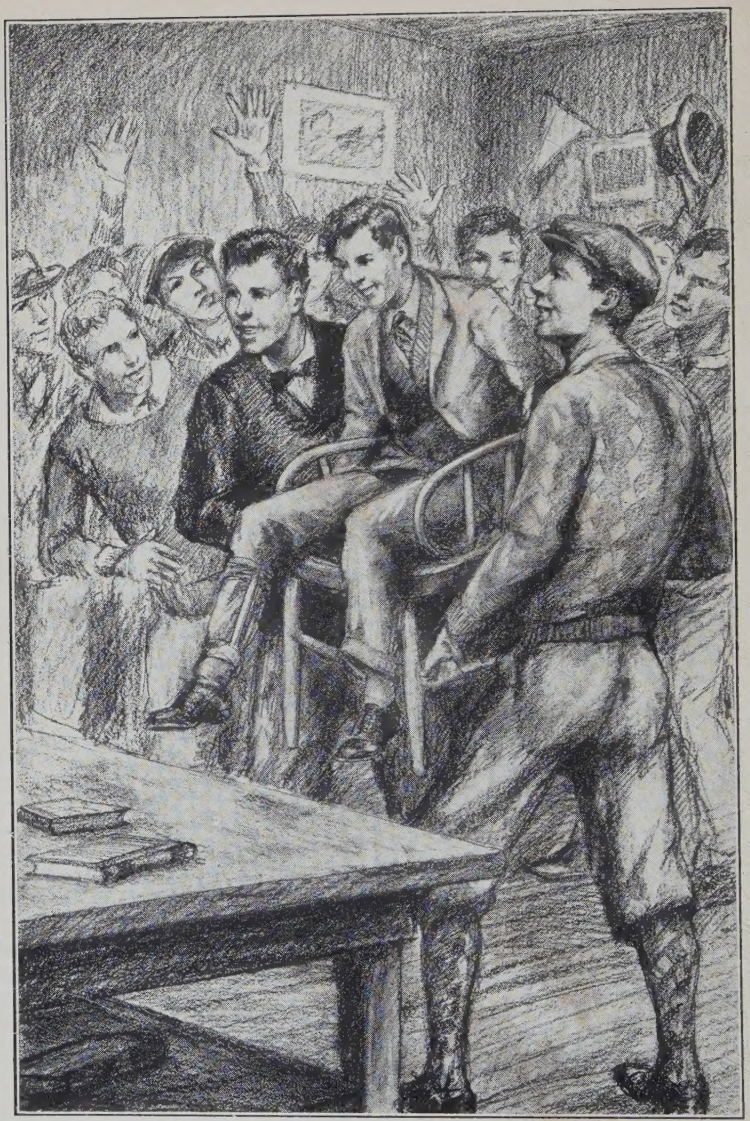

"SQUINT FOR CHAIRMAN!" LAUGHED THE TEAM.

Hit By Pitcher. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 143)

HIT BY PITCHER

BY

HAROLD M. SHERMAN

AUTHOR OF
ONE MINUTE TO PLAY
TOUCHDOWN!
BASES FULL, ETC.

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To

WALTER PEEK

Whom I First Met
on the Tennis Court—
A Thorough Sportsman
Who Lives as He Plays—Clean!

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HIT BY PITCHER

CHAPTER I

WALLY SEEKS AN HONOR

"Well, fellows, it's soon going to be up to us to elect another captain."

It was the first afternoon of baseball practice at Baldwin High and a squad of forty-three candidates was out, tossing the ball around but minding Coach Jedele's orders to keep their arms "under wraps."

"How about me for captain?" kidded Squint Pickens. "About time I was being promoted. I've been team mascot for three years!"

The candidates laughed. Squint, now in the seventh grade, had been a familiar little figure on the Baldwin High athletic field. A twisted leg, worn in an iron brace, barred him from active participation in sport, but Squint was manfully getting his joy from serving the older

fellows as they fought for the school on diamond, gridiron or hardwood.

"You're the team's oldest veteran, that's a fact," credited Wally Coburn, good-naturedly. "Paul Reimer, captain-elect, was our only three-year-man besides you . . . and now that he's moved away, you're first in line. I'll tell you, gang, what do you say we elect Squint 'honorary captain'?"

"Yea!" chorused a volley of voices.

"All those opposed?" challenged Wally. "Just let me hear anybody say 'nay'!"

Not a sound, except the plunking of baseballs into mitts.

"Unanimous!" declared Wally, with mock authority. "Mr. Squint Pickens, it gives me great pleasure to inform you that the title of honorary captain is now yours!"

"Thank you very much," acknowledged the youth with the twisted leg, grinning.

"Don't mention it," rejoined Wally. "You're privileged to use the title as much as you like, just so you keep up your job of mascoting. We baseball elephants have got to be kept in water; we couldn't do without you

to look after our trunk load of bats, and as for the solid ivory that we pull every season . . .!"

"Choke him!"

"Who gave him the authority to spout off?"

"Bench that guy!"

Wally Coburn, star batsman of last year's team, retreated, ducking before a barrage of protest and arms lifted threateningly as though to hurl baseballs.

"You see, Squint, what a revolution I started just trying to put you in power," he called. "I sure pity the bird who's really elected captain!"

"Maybe that's why Reimer moved away," suggested Eagle Carver, last year's center fielder, noted for his marvelous throwing arm. "Afraid of the responsibility of being captain!"

"Might be something in that," joshed Lou Perry, second baseman. "Remember, Eagle, how he tried to saddle the job off on you?"

Eagle leaped to make a catch of a high one thrown by Matt Scudder, shortstop.

"Get 'em down, Matt! If you're going to

heave 'em like that you'd better pair off with Chic Redman. He's the first sacker, not me!"

Matt, blade of grass between his teeth, made an impish face and proceeded to pitch the next ball some inches higher. Eagle left the ground in a desperate leap and just succeeded in ticking it.

"Now you chase it!" he commanded, as the ball rolled across the diamond and into the empty dugout. "Maybe that'll cure you!"

"Aw, say!" chuckled Matt as he jogged past. "Let me get 'em out of my system, won't you? Do you suppose I want to save those up for a game?"

Eagle turned to Lou with a hopeless gesture.

"He's wild as a hawk as usual. Anyone to play with him ought to be reinforced by a barn. I can't see why he always has to pick on me to warm him up."

"It's because you're an outfielder," explained Lou. "He figures you can cover more ground."

"No doubt," replied Eagle, grudgingly. "Oh, what was that you were saying, Lou, a minute ago?"

Lou, holding up a throw, stared vacantly.

"Gosh! Don't ask me. How can I remember what I've just said when I never know what I'm going to say next?"

"You were talking about Reimer's trying to pass the captaincy over to Eagle," reminded Harve Cody, veteran catcher.

"My living dictaphone!" jollied Lou, thumbing at Harve. "How does he remember such trifles?"

"That's simple," explained Southpaw Morris Baker, who had been pitching to Harve. "The impressions of everything we say are all recorded on the wax in his ears!"

"Ow!"

Harve, in humorous retaliation, steamed a baseball down to Southy which smacked stingingly against his thinly padded fielder's glove. Coach Jedele, former big league pitcher, glanced reprimandingly Harve's way.

"No more of that!" he ordered, as Cody grinned sheepishly.

"There, I guess that will hold you," called Southy in a low voice, as he blew tenderly on a burning palm.

"Excuse me," apologized Harve. "I forgot myself. I thought I was pegging down to second!"

Candidates for Baldwin High's baseball nine were all in excessively good spirits. It was a great feeling to be out on the diamond again after months away from the game. Baldwin annually closed each season by meeting her old and mightiest of rivals, Preston City. The last scheduled contest for both teams found them at the height of their development and, because Preston City had a habit of turning out close to state championship nines, the battles often simmered down to titular affairs. This is what had happened the previous season when Baldwin, playing on its home diamond, had lost to Preston City by the score of 8 to 5. The defeat had been sustained despite Wally Coburn's two three-base hits and two two-baggers in five times at bat and Paul Reimer's unassisted triple play. With the bases full, in Preston City's half of the seventh inning, in which they had scored six of their eight runs, Paul had saved the slaughter from be-

coming overwhelming by a marvelous one-handed catch of a line drive. He touched the third base bag to double the runner off that base, then chased the runner racing toward third back toward second, tagging him out on the base path. This great fielding play topped what, for the veteran Reimer, had been a season of superfine baseball, and team-mates, meeting after the game, had honored him with the captaincy of the nine for the following year.

Reimer's selection as captain met with only one objection among his team-mates and this objection was not voiced. But the fellow whose bat had driven in all of Baldwin's runs in the Preston City game had secretly felt that he most merited the honor. Of course it would not have been politic to mention the fact out and out. Yet, the only thing Wally Coburn could figure that Paul Reimer had over him was one year more of service on the team. Otherwise, Wally's supremacy, in his opinion, was unquestioned. Hadn't he batted for an average of .429 for the season against Reimer's .387? Why Eagle Carver, with .396, was more nearly deserving on the basis of worth to the

team! And wasn't this the basis on which team captains were chosen? They were usually supposed to be the outstanding stars of their nines. Reimer was a star all right but there were several who stood ahead of him. Eagle, for instance! When Eagle's name had been suggested he had immediately withdrawn in favor of Paul, and Baldwin's third sacker had been unanimously elected. And then, three months after accepting the honor, Paul's family had up and moved away, taking the captain-elect with them! So here was the question of the team captaincy come up to be settled all over again. And Wally Coburn was one who had the subject very much on his mind.

"It's not that I care so much for the honor," Wally had reasoned to himself. "But I've worked as hard as anybody for the team, as my two years' record more than bears out, and I honestly feel that I deserve to be chosen."

Fourteen members of last year's squad remained as a nucleus around which to build the new nine. Five of the fourteen were regulars, four first-team substitutes, and the other five reserves. These fourteen would be the ones

empowered to select from their number a captain to fill the vacancy. And a meeting must be held for the nomination and election of said captain before the first game of the season, according to Athletic Association By-Laws. This meant that but ten days remained, at the most, wherein minds must be made up, and for any player to succeed to the captaincy would require a two-thirds majority, which, as Wally figured, must total at least eight and one-third men!

"Ought to be nine to make sure," thought Baldwin's star batter and right fielder. "But how to get them thinking of me?"

That was the question. No one, in truth, had acted very excited about this choice of captain business, not even when he, Wally, had brought the matter up in an indirect way. Take this latest instance of it when he'd come right out, during practice and said, "Well, fellows, it's soon going to be up to us to elect another captain." It had scarcely gotten a rise. He'd dragged the subject out a bit by proposing Squint Pickens as honorary captain but even this had fallen somewhat flat. And the affair

had ended by attention being drawn to Eagle Carver instead of himself.

"Still giving Eagle credit for dodging the captaincy," reflected Wally, glumly. "Say, can you imagine any fellow really dodging a thing like that? Eagle was just wise enough to see that Reimer was ticketed and it made him look good to take the background when his name was suggested. Now that Reimer's out of the way and the captaincy is open again, of course Eagle's the first one to be getting consideration!"

Harve Cody and Wally Coburn had been the closest of chums. Their lockers were side by side in the dressing room. During the playing season it was customary for one to wait for the other and for them to leave the building together. Tonight Cody was the last to climb into his street clothes.

"Hurry it up, Harve," urged Wally. "I've got something I want to talk to you about."

"Well, commence . . . begin!" commanded Cody. "Why postpone the flow of lingua? Fire away! I'm listening."

"Not here," replied Wally, glancing about. "It'll have to wait till we get outside."

"Oh, something private, eh?" whistled Cody, with a mischievous air. "All right, we'll accelerate. Darn, there goes a shoe lace! You see, Wally, what happens when you try to rush me?"

Baldwin's star batter grimaced.

"Harve, you're close to hopeless!"

"Get out! Something like this is bound to happen in the best of families! . . . Good night! There goes the other shoe string!"

Cody's face took on a look of momentary despair. He looked down at the piece of shoe string ruefully.

"Just for that I've a good notion to go barefooted!"

"Harve, for Pete's sake!" pleaded Wally. "Here! Here's an extra pair!"

Reaching into his locker, Baldwin's right fielder tossed out a new pair of laces. Cody accepted them with a grin.

"Thanks, old man. I saw those laces awhile ago. I've been needing a new pair and I figured if I broke my old ones enough

times that you'd . . . Hey! Cut it!"

Wally, leaping upon Harve, had given him a good-natured pummeling.

On the street at last, Wally now showed shy reluctance about broaching the subject he had wanted to talk to Cody about. The conversation, consequently, took the form of comments on what each thought of the season's possibilities.

"Looks like we've got a world of good material out this year," said Wally, keeping pace with Harve.

"Yep," answered Cody. "And I'm expecting Southy to show more stuff in the pitcher's box than old Ping Ellis, too. Somehow I've got a hunch that feeding Preston City left-handed pitching for a change will bring us luck. Poor Ping tried to beat Preston three straight years and they beat him worse each time. Remember the scores? Two to one, five to three, and, last year, eight to five."

"I remember last year's score all right," admitted Wally. "We didn't have any license to lose that game the way we were hitting . . ."

"You mean, the way *you* were hitting!" corrected Cody. "Boy, you went wild in that game."

"I did manage to get hold of the apple a few times, didn't I?" said Wally, pleased. Then, with a calculating, sidewise glance at Cody, he added, "By the way, Harve, whom do you think you'd like to see captain?"

Cody stared. Then an understanding gleam flashed in his eyes.

"So this is what you wanted to talk to me about, eh?"

Wally's face flushed.

"Well, er . . . yes . . . that is, I was wondering myself and I kind of thought . . . I mean, I wanted to get your idea."

Cody nodded, walking along a moment in silence.

"Gee, Wally," he exclaimed, finally. "You've got me. I haven't really bothered my head about it. What diff does it make, anyway?"

"Oh, I don't suppose it makes so much," answered Wally, a bit evasively. "Except that . . . well, there's always a right person for

the place and sometimes . . . well, if fellows don't give the matter much thought, someone is railroaded in who really doesn't deserve . . . I mean, who wouldn't be quite as well qualified as . . . you get what I mean?"

"I think I do," said Cody, slowly, his own face flushing. "But . . . a . . . fellows don't usually go out for such things."

"That's true," agreed Wally. "But, on the other hand, some fellows don't really want it. Now there's Eagle, for instance . . ."

"Ho, Eagle!" retorted Cody. "Don't worry! He says he doesn't want it but he'd take it if he was elected."

"You think he would?" asked Wally, impulsively. "Yes, of course! Why shouldn't he? It's funny, isn't it, how the fellows have sort of singled him out?"

"I don't know that it's so funny," defended Cody. "Eagle's a prince of a guy. He'd make a good captain, too!"

The two chums came to the dividing of their ways, the street intersection which led to their

respective homes. They stopped automatically.

"Y-e-s, I suppose Eagle would be all right," admitted Wally, with evident reluctance. "But, just between you and me, Harve, don't you think that I . . . or rather, that the fellows might have thought . . .? Of course it wouldn't look well for me to . . . to talk myself up . . . and I wouldn't do that for the world . . . but . . ." The Baldwin star batsman broke off in confusion and obvious embarrassment.

"Meaning that you'd like to have your name proposed?" Cody finished for him, bluntly.

"Not that, particularly," replied Wally, a bit shamefacedly. "But if you could just pass the word around that I . . . well, I wouldn't mind . . . in fact I'd be glad to serve the fellows in case they . . ."

"I see," interjected Cody, coldly. "Sorry, Wally, you'll have to get someone else to toot your horn. I'm not canvassing for anybody . . . least of all for you!"

"Why not?" flared Wally. "Listen, Harve,

you're the only one I can go to with this. Besides, you're the closest friend I've got . . .!"

"And that's just the reason," retorted Cody. "My plugging you would leave a bad taste in the fellows' mouths. They'd smell a rat right away. It would queer you quicker than anything else."

"I don't see why it should," contended Wally. "I . . . oh! Of course, Harve, if you were figuring on standing a chance yourself?"

The Baldwin catcher stiffened.

"What's gotten into you, Wally? . . . Watch yourself! You're developing a streak I don't like."

"What you talking about?"

Cody regarded his chum hotly.

"If you don't know, it's high time you were finding out!" he answered pointedly. "And, meanwhile, I'd be darn careful I didn't let anyone else get wise. Good night!"

Turning on his heel, Harve Cody, the best friend Wally Coburn had, strode off, deaf to all entreaties to wait and let his chum "explain."

For a long moment, Baldwin's star batter stood looking after his departing pal, aghast. Then a change came over him and he took to laughing.

"Harve's funny," he said to himself. "Get sore over a little thing like that! I'll bet I hit the nail on the head. He's hoping he's elected captain himself!"

And with that Wally turned his steps homeward, whistling to let the world at large know that he had nothing whatsoever on his mind.

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN-ELECT

The first week of baseball practice passed without particular incident except that the pressure of the workouts was increased slightly, day by day, under the wise tutelage of Coach Jedele. The former big league pitcher was a past master in the art of coaxing baseball talent out of green material. He never seemed to hurry the candidates, took unusual care not to fluster them, observed their playing when they were totally unaware of it and let them develop themselves to a point where he knew they would be responsive to criticism and advice.

"You've got to give a boy some rope," Coach Jedele had explained once. "And then pull it in gently after you've let him graze around for himself, getting used to the pasture. A lot of good baseball material has been killed by nipping it in the bud like an early

frost. If I find that I've got to knock a fellow down, I wait till I'm sure he's able to get up again before I do it. . . . This hard-boiled stuff doesn't go with me as a rule. Besides, I've seldom seen the situation that a fellow couldn't solve himself if he was just started on the right track. And when he's worked out his own problems he's always stronger for it. This old idea of a coach cracking a whip and making fellows jump through hoops is out!"

All of which helped lookers-on to appreciate the method being used in training Baldwin youths. Coach Jedele was a man admired by the townspeople and idolized by the boys who played under his direction. And one had but to point to Baldwin High's athletic record during Coach Jedele's reign to prove the effectiveness of his system.

In the locker room, three days before the first game of the season against Bingham, Coach Jedele addressed a word to the fourteen veteran candidates.

"You fellows better get busy electing a new captain," he advised. "Choose a chairman, hold a meeting and get the matter over with.

Should have been attended to last week."

The players regarded one another considerately. Coach Jedele was right. No use dilly-dallying any longer. Each had taken the attitude of "let George do it" and, beyond casual comments on the subject, had preferred not to take the initiative. But now that the coach had suggested action there was no reason for anyone to hold back.

"I nominate Wally," called out Lou Perry. "Wally for chairman!"

"Second the motion!" cried Matt Scudder.

"Hold on! Wait a minute," protested Wally, showing concern. "I . . . let somebody else . . ."

"You're just the one!" encouraged Eagle.

"You bet!" seconded Chic Redman. "And he doesn't get out of it!"

"But I . . .!" protested Wally, confusedly. "It might not be convenient. That is . . .!"

"What do you mean—not convenient?"

"Mr. Chairman! . . . Oh, Mr. Chairman!"

It was useless to object. Baldwin's star bat-

ter decided finally that he would have to make the best of it. But what a bad break! This serving as chairman would place him in a most embarrassing position to entertain his name for the captaincy. In fact it might have the effect of removing him from even being considered. Leave it to Eagle to take advantage of the situation. "You're just the one," Eagle had said, and his remark had landslided the others. Oh, Eagle was playing a nice, quiet, crafty game . . . pretending he didn't care a hang about being captain . . . acting modest and retiring . . . all for a purpose.

"The chairman ought to have the say as to when to hold the meeting," declared Al Tyson.

"Name the time," urged Southpaw Baker. "And we'll all be there!"

"Well, what do you say to tomorrow night, right here, after practice?"

"Suits me!"

"Fine!"

"All who want to be captain kindly leave your names with the chairman," kidded Dolf Stoner. "Put me down, Wally!"

The group of veterans disbanded laughingly

and went their several ways. Harve Cody had discreetly refrained from entering into the discussion or making any remarks relating to the selection of Wally as chairman. Since his taking issue with Wally on the point of mentioning his chum as a candidate for captain, the two had not been overly friendly. And Cody had taken to dressing quickly and getting out ahead of Wally, which practice had been noted by fellow players and commented upon, wonderingly. Today was no exception. Cody was among the first to depart, while Wally, on the contrary, seemed to be taking over-long. He was particularly, almost painfully methodical in the way he folded his shirt and hung up his baseball clothing. Awaiting his opportunity, Wally motioned to Squint Pickens, Baldwin mascot.

"I'm going your direction," he told the flattered youth. "If you don't mind waiting a second till I put my things away."

"Sure!" said Squint, obligingly. Baldwin's mascot hero-worshiped the school's athletic men, and some, as in the case of the star batter, more than the rest. It was therefore a decided

honor for Wally to have signified that he desired Squint's company. The fellow with the twisted leg, who would never be able to engage in sports, dropped down on a bench, happily.

"Gee, Wally," he said, as he watched the veteran right fielder scraping the mud off his cleats, "you sure lost that ball today. I could only find one of the four you hit over the fence!"

"That so?" asked Wally, absently. "Yes, I guess I'm beginning to get my old eye back."

Squint grinned. "I'll say! . . . I was standing right near coach when you smacked that longest one . . . and do you know what he said?"

Wally dropped his shoes in the locker and turned toward the mascot, interestedly.

"No, what?"

"That you were the greatest natural hitter he'd ever seen in high school."

"He *did?*"

"Yeah . . . and he also said he was counting on you to bust up most of the games this year."

"Who'd he say this to?"

"Principal Dutton. I wasn't really supposed to hear. Maybe I shouldn't have told you," apologized Squint, uncertainly.

"Oh, that's all right," reassured Wally. "Can't do any harm. Well, Squint, I'm ready. Let's beat it."

Baldwin's star batter snapped his locker door shut and spun the combination. The mascot slid off the bench.

"Get the lights, will you?" directed Wally. "Last one out has to turn off the juice."

Squint obliged, hobbling out into the open and slamming the outer door after him. It was dusk outside and lights had come on in houses across the street.

"Coach is certainly keeping us at it late enough," observed Wally as he measured his steps to Squint's shorter ones.

"Probably that's because he's out after the championship this year," guessed Squint.

Wally laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised. He's after that every year."

"But he hasn't won it yet," reminded Squint, "although he's come mighty close. But, this

year, when he figures he's going to have his strongest team . . ."

Wally stopped and stared incredulously.

"How do you know that?"

Squint's face colored. "Oh, gee, that's something else I . . . I wasn't supposed to hear!"

Greatly amused, Baldwin's star batter slapped the team mascot on the back.

"Squint, you've got dictaphone ears," he complimented. Then, as though the question were being asked casually, he added, "Tell me, what have those ears picked up about whom the fellows want for captain?"

"Not much," admitted Squint, a bit reluctantly. "Let me think. I don't know as I've heard any of 'em say, right out. Oh, yes . . . I remember now. Yesterday, when I came back into the locker room for Matt's glove, Lou Perry and Chic Redman and Harve Cody were talking . . ."

"Harve Cody!" exclaimed Wally under his breath. "Yeah, and what were they saying?" he encouraged.

"Well, I really wasn't paying so much at-

tention," explained Squint. "I just busted right in and right out again. But I did hear Harve say, 'Yes, I think Eagle would be okay' . . ."

"Eagle!"

"And Lou answered him, 'Eagle's the boy who ought to have it.' That's all. I was gone before there was any more. I don't suppose I'd have thought of this again if you hadn't asked me . . ."

Baldwin's star batter nodded. The two walked for perhaps half a block in silence, Squint glancing up wonderingly at his athletic companion.

"Squint," said Wally, finally, with an attempt at a jocular air, "who do *you* think would make a good captain?"

"Who do *I* think?" repeated the mascot. "What diff does that make? I can't vote."

"Well, I'd just like to get your idea."

"Gee!" Squint laughed, a bit nervously, as though the responsibility of deciding such a question was a little beyond him. "I don't know. But if Harve Cody thinks . . . and

Lou Perry . . . and . . . well, Eagle's sure good enough for me!"

The dusk was so deep by now that Squint, even if he had been observing, would not have noticed Baldwin's star batter flinch.

"So you . . . you think the same way?" said Wally, as though listening to the sound of his own voice. "But what would you have thought, Squint, if you'd heard Harve mention *my* name instead of Eagle's?"

"Oh, you'd be good, too!" assured Squint, innocently.

Wally, stopping beneath the shadow of a large maple tree which was at the halfway point of leafing out, put a hand on the team mascot's shoulder.

"Listen, Squint. Answer me honest. Have you ever heard any of the fellows say anything against me?"

Squint's eyes widened. "Why . . . Why, no!"

"Well, wouldn't you think, then, if the fellows should hear my name suggested for captain, they might be just as strong for me

. . . maybe stronger . . . than they are for Eagle?"

"Maybe," considered Squint, slowly. "Yes . . . sure . . . I don't see why not," he added, as he saw Wally looking at him queerly. "As *strong*, anyway!"

"But you're not so certain that I . . . that they'd favor *me* over Eagle?" Baldwin's star batter persisted.

"I wouldn't have any way of telling," answered the team mascot, now extremely uneasy. "Say, what you doing, cross-examining me?"

Wally laughed disarmingly.

"Don't get funny! . . . Squint, would you like to do me a favor?"

The mascot's eyes gleamed.

"Tickled to death! . . . I mean, if it's something I *can* do."

Wally leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"Oh, this'll be a cinch. First, there's a little something I'd like you to keep under your hat. Could you do that?"

Squint grinned. "Do you think my hat's big enough?" he asked.

"Cut it! This is serious. Squint, I don't

mind saying to you that I feel I'm entitled to be captain."

The youthful mascot's lips parted in astonishment.

"Yeah?" he exclaimed, questioningly.

"But it looks like a fellow's got to do a little campaigning to get in the running," exclaimed Wally. "You see, that's why Eagle's being considered. He made a grandstand play when Paul Reimer was elected by withdrawing in Paul's favor . . . and he's been saying, every chance he's had since, that he doesn't want to be captain. But that kind of stuff is just what's making him strong with the gang."

"Sure," admitted Squint. "But how can he help it if he means it?"

"That's just the point," insisted Wally. "He doesn't. He'd be captain in a minute if he was elected. Now, with me, it's different. I want to be captain and I'm not ashamed to say so. Just the same, it wouldn't be good psychology to come right out and let the fellows know this. I've got to be diplomatic. And here's where you can come in fine. Nobody'd ever figure you had an ax to grind. What I'd

like you to do tomorrow is to sound out the fellows by suggesting me as captain in sort of an off-hand way. Do you think you could do it?"

Baldwin High's mascot stood hesitant, leaning up against the tree. He liked the team's star batter and wanted to do what he could for him. It was highly complimentary, in a way, that Wally had come to him when he needed assistance. Went to show that he rated high with Baldwin's right fielder, to be taken so into his confidence. And as far as doing the favor requested, this would be pie. He could scout around among the team members and make remarks about Wally and get their reactions without any of them getting wise. Couldn't be any harm in this, either.

"I called the election for tomorrow night after practice," Wally added. "And I'd like to know, before then, how many fellows out of the bunch might be for me . . . if my name should be proposed."

"Leave it to me," promised Squint warmly. "I'll get the dope and give you the low-down before the end of practice."

"Squint, you're a brick!" declared Wally, squeezing the mascot's arm. "Do this and I'll remember you for life!"

With that the two broke company, the youth with the twisted leg hobbling off on the double-quick in an effort to get home before his supper was cold, and Wally himself falling into a dog trot.

"So Harve's working against me," he thought, as he ran. "All right, I'll show him I can do without him. All I need is to be talked up to the fellows. And say, maybe this being made chairman will be a boomerang in my favor! It'll put me up before the bunch so when my name's proposed I can call for someone else to take the chair and . . . Boy, I can see this working out great!"

At next day's practice session the fellow who wanted to be captain carefully avoided close contact with the team mascot, who, had anyone been paying particular notice, might have been seen approaching group after group of candidates to whom he made a certain studied remark, awaited its reaction and then passed lightly on. Squint had thought long on how

best to do what Wally had requested—to find out exactly what veteran team-mates thought or would think of the star batter—considered as the possible captain.

"Say, fellows, is it straight that Wally's going to be next captain?" he would ask, the question flashing so completely out of a clear sky as to command immediate attention.

"What's biting you, Squint?" Lou Perry answered when the team mascot had tried out the remark in his hearing. "Somebody been handing you a line?"

"Not exactly," Squint replied evasively. "Only from what I've been hearing . . ."

"Wally wouldn't make such a bad captain at that," commented Southpaw Baker, which was just the sort of comeback Squint was hoping to arouse.

"I can't see him," rejoined Al Tyson, who had been working out in left field. "He's too sure of himself. Darned if I don't think, sometimes, he's stuck on himself! Anyway, he's too forward for me. Now, if he was more like Eagle . . ."

Squint, ears burning, drifted from this group.

The little favor Wally had asked of him wasn't proving quite as easy as Baldwin's mascot had first pictured. One had to be so almighty cautious about springing the remark just right, and some of the comments which Squint's sounding-out campaign was bringing forth were not particularly encouraging. But, since he had agreed to go through with the matter, the fellow with the twisted leg persisted until Wally's name had been mentioned, in connection with the captaincy, to all who would have a vote at the meeting.

"Whew!" Squint exclaimed in relief at the finish. "Never again! Not for a rich old uncle. But since it's done, I claim I did a good job of it!"

And now the next difficulty confronting Squint was to snatch a somewhat guarded moment in which to slip the information he had gained to Wally. It was two days before the opening game of the season and Coach Jedele had chosen sides, a first and second team, ordering a five inning practice contest. This meant that Wally would be kept fairly busy in the field and at bat, and Squint was quick to

observe that Wally did not wish them to be seen too much together. He was running no risk of team-mates jumping at conclusions. But once, when he was apparently sure no one was looking, Wally caught Squint's eye and inclined his head back toward the grandstand. The team mascot, understanding, nodded.

With Harve Cody batting in the first team's half of the third, the Baldwin catcher hit a vicious foul which carried up and over the grandstand roof. Squint, as was his habit, took after the ball and disappeared behind the grandstand. Wally, out near the first base line, gave chase also and the two met in the roadway back of the stands.

"Well?" asked Wally, eagerly. "What did you find out?"

Squint, searching for the ball, shook his head.

"They weren't so hot," he informed, bluntly. "At least I didn't get so many real rises. Southy was for you. Most of the others looked kind of interested. It was really awfully hard to tell. Anyhow, they can't help thinking of you now."

"I see," replied Wally, vaguely. "Hmmm!

. . . At least there wasn't anything said against me?"

"No, not very much."

"What do you mean—'not very much'?"

Squint, locating the ball underneath a shed, poked it out and started back with it, Baldwin's star batter following.

"I—I'd rather not say," pleaded the team mascot, "I don't think you'd want to hear. Anyway, I don't believe it."

"Spill it!" urged Wally. "I'm used to . . . to other people's opinions. What did Harve say about me?"

"It wasn't Cody," denied Squint quickly. "I'm not saying who it was. But one of the bunch said he thought you were stuck up . . . had the big head . . ."

Wally's lips set tightly.

"Go on," he invited.

". . . that he'd like you better if you were more like Eagle," finished the team mascot.

Baldwin's star batter clenched his fists hotly.

"Oh, he did, eh?"

"Of course he's all wet," added Squint loyally.

The fellow who was ambitious to be made captain patted the youth who idolized him on the shoulder.

"Squint," he said, a bit huskily, "you're a good old stand-by. Much obliged for all the trouble I've put you to. What you've just slipped me will help a lot. Especially that dope about my being stuck up. If that's what the guys really think of me . . .!" Wally's eyes widened from the force of a sudden idea. He turned to the team mascot excitedly. "You know, Squint, I'll bet you anything Eagle's at the bottom of this! I'll bet he started the talk about my having the big head to queer me. It stands to reason he'd be jealous, don't it?"

The two had reached the end of the grandstand from where the baseball diamond could be seen. Squint, pulling back his arm, hurled the baseball back onto the field.

"Jealous?" he repeated, obviously puzzled. "Why should he be jealous of you?"

"Why, don't you see?" started Wally, "I'm the best . . ."

Baldwin High's right fielder bit his lip just in time. A color mounted in his cheeks.

"Say, I'll have to hurry," he exclaimed, gazing intently at the field. "Looks like I'm next at bat!"

But Squint, staring after Baldwin's star batter, took on an expression of bitter disappointment. He had just witnessed an idol crumble to pieces before him.

"I hope now he doesn't get it," denounced the team mascot. "Gee, if Wally isn't the example of a good guy gone wrong!"

"Everybody here?" asked the chairman of the meeting called for the purpose of electing a successor to the departed captain, Paul Reimer.

"Everybody but Eagle," answered Chic Redman.

"Where is he?" demanded the chair.

"Lost his glove," informed Dan Cort, relief pitcher. "He'll be in in a second."

"Lost his glove!" thought the chair. "Probably did it on purpose to hold the meeting up and keep his name before it. Pretty slick, he

is! But we've got a quorum present. I'll just call the meeting without him."

Taking a baseball bat, Wally used it as a gavel and pounded with it against the side of a locker.

"Meeting will now come to order," he announced.

"Here!" warned Matt Scudder. "Look out where you're hitting. That happens to be my locker. Move over a couple to your own, will you?"

"Order!" grinned Wally, rapping again on the locker. "And the sooner you pipe down, the sooner I stop knocking!"

"What a hard-boiled chairman," protested Matt, in an undertone. "But watch me get around him. Mr. Chairman!"

"Mr. Scudder," recognized Wally.

"Do I have the floor?"

"You do."

"Then permit me to suggest respectfully that you refrain, under penalty of a cold shower bath, from any further attempt to damage property for which I am held personally responsible!"

"Do you put that in the form of a motion?" called a voice.

"I do!" insisted Matt. "And it won't be slow motion, either!"

"YEA!" from the voting contingent.

"Order!" demanded the chairman, tapping with his bat on the concrete floor.

"That's more like it," observed Matt. "I temporarily withdraw the motion, gentlemen."

"We have gathered here," declared the chairman, in an attempt at a light vein, "to elect a team captain . . . ."

"Tell us something we don't know!" spoke up a disrespectful voice, which brought broad grins.

"To choose one among us who we feel is the best fitted and whose services to the team entitle him to be so honored," continued Wally, his face flushing.

"Mr. Chairman!"

"Mr. Perry?"

"Are we going on with this meeting without Eagle?"

"Well, there's a quorum present, isn't there?"

"Yes, but I don't see any need to be so darn parliamentary in an affair of this kind. I suggest that the chair appoint someone to go out and bring Eagle in."

"Yea!"

The chairman, noticeably embarrassed, looked about the small group.

"All right, Mr. Cody," he selected. "Find Mr. Carver at once and bring him in sooner!"

Harve Cody departed as per instructions, giving a curious glance at Wally as he left. A moment of silence followed, the fellows slouching on the benches, awaiting action. Five, ten minutes crawled past.

"Nominations for captain are now in order!" announced Wally, finally. "We've given anyone time enough to get here."

"Right!" agreed Chic Redman.

"Mr. Chairman!" called Lou Perry, at once.

"Mr. Perry!"

Baldwin's second baseman arose.

"I hereby place in nomination the name of Eagle Carver for captain!"

"Second the nomination," called Matt Scudder, amid laughter.

"Do you fellows think," questioned the chair, a bit awkwardly, "that someone who hasn't shown interest enough to attend this meeting deserves consideration as . . .?"

"Sure!"

"Eagle's all right!"

"What you doing—kidding us?"

Harve Cody reappeared in the doorway. "I got him," he announced. "He's coming!"

"Quick! Let's get this business over with!" entreated Lou Perry, excitedly.

"Order!" demanded the chair. "Eagle Carver has been proposed for captain. Further nominations will now be entertained."

"Mr. Chairman!" cried Lou Perry, leaping to his feet.

"Just a minute!" censured Wally, amid commotion. "What do you think this is—a one-man proposition? Give somebody else a chance. Mr. Baker, did I hear you address the chair?"

Southpaw Baker looked his surprise.

"Not me!"

Using his wits against what he recognized as an attempt to put Eagle through as captain,

Wally had made a bold play to solicit Southy's nomination of him as captain, remembering that Squint had named Baker as being favorable. But the impromptu device failed, and Baldwin's star batter found himself confronted with an unwieldy bunch on the verge of landsliding.

"Mr. Chairman!"

If only he could get his name in nomination! . . . Wally glanced toward the new voice which besought the floor. Harve Cody! What could Harve want? He'd played politics by sending Harve out after Eagle. This would indicate to the fellows that there actually weren't any strained relations. That he felt all right toward Harve. And perhaps Harve had in mind to prove that he was still his best friend. Perhaps? There was scarcely any doubt of it. Harve was wanting to place his name in nomination.

"Mr. Cody," recognized Wally, smiling.

"Mr. Chairman," spoke Cody. "I move that the nominations be closed."

"Second the motion!" shouted Lou Perry, in high glee.

Shocked, Wally stood for a moment, looking helplessly out over the group of team-mates before him.

"Yea, here's Eagle now!"

The fellow whose name was up for captain entered the locker room quietly, glove in hand. He was followed by Squint Pickens, mascot.

"Any remarks," queried Wally, "before putting the motion?"

"No!"

"What's the motion?" asked Eagle, interestedly.

"That the nominations be closed," advised the chair.

"Who's been nominated?" inquired the tardy team member.

"None of your business!" called Lou Perry.

"Order!" tapped the chair.

"Mr. Chairman!" pleaded Eagle.

"Mr. Carver!"

"If my name's been placed in nomination I wish to withdraw it. Pardon me, fellows, but I *do not choose to run!*"

"You can't help yourself!"

"Question on the motion!"

Wally brought his bat into play. "Order, ruffians! Order! . . . Perhaps Mr. Carver has some very good reason why he does not choose to run. If so, perhaps we should respect it."

"No, no!"

"Question!"

"Mr. Chairman!" cried Eagle. "Fellows, if you'll permit me . . ."

"Sit down!"

"I think our chairman is far better fitted . . ."

"SIT DOWN!"

"There's a motion before the house!"

"Well, will the maker of that motion withdraw it, please, so that I can . . .?"

"Mr. Cody," said the chair, eagerly, "do you . . .?"

"Consent," nodded Cody.

"No, no!" chorused the rest.

"But I seconded the motion, Mr. Chairman!" reminded Lou Perry. "And I *don't grant* consent! I demand you put the motion to the vote!"

"Yea!" insisted the voting population.

Bound by rules of order which he had diplomatically attempted to forestall, Wally was forced to face the issue with as much grace as he could command.

"Motion has been duly made and seconded," he announced, "that the nominations be closed. All in favor will signify by saying 'Aye.' "

"AYE!" in thunderous tones.

"The ayes have it," decided Wally, without calling for a negative vote.

"All right, gang!" cried Lou Perry, jumping atop a bench. "That makes Eagle our next captain. Now let's show him how unanimous it is!"

Three cheers were given with a vim which made the metal lockers vibrate.

"Speech! Speech!" yelled the crowd.

Baldwin High's new captain-elect regarded the hilarious group of fellow team-mates soberly.

"Fellows, I honestly didn't want this," he said, quietly. "I'd much rather just . . . well . . . gone on playing the game, without any more . . . well, I was going to say trouble. Of course I've never been captain

before and I probably shouldn't talk that way about it because I know you fellows figure you're doing me an honor which part I really appreciate. But I'm telling you right now, if there was some way I knew to get out of this, I'd sure be tickled."

"What a chance!"

"Yea! Some speech!"

"Who said he'd lost his glove? I'll bet he was out thinking that speech up!" guyed Lou Perry.

"He lost his glove all right," defended Squint. "Or, rather, a kid took it. I helped Eagle get it back."

"Oh, we believe him!" joshed Chic Redman.

"Will somebody make a motion that we adjourn?" begged Lou Perry. "I don't want the chair to hit me with that baseball bat or make any more cracks about my being the only moving voter!"

"I so move!" called Southpaw Baker.

"Fine!" congratulated Baldwin's second baseman with a mischievous glance at the chairman. "There you are, Wally! Southy's motion. You thought he had one a few minutes

before—remember? You just heard him ahead of time, that's all!"

"Meeting is adjourned!" announced Wally, summarily.

And in no time at all Eagle Carver was surrounded by a back-thumping, hand-shaking bunch. But there was one among them who did not stay for long. He ducked out as soon as he conveniently could, to hide what to him was one of the bitterest disappointments of his life. And the humiliation had been the deeper for his name's not even being placed in nomination. As for Eagle Carver, his last grandstand act, the gesture of attempting to withdraw and magnanimously suggesting the chairman as a more likely candidate . . .! Well, if Eagle had proved his sincerity by going through with it, okay. But since he had accepted the captaincy, the mentioning of the chairman's name had only made the situation more odious by comparison. Clever guy, Eagle! All right, the season was just starting. The fellows would see, before it was over, to whom the captaincy should have gone!

CHAPTER III

A BURNING RESENTMENT

"WHAT's gotten into Wally?" asked Chic Redman, playing first base at practice the night following election. "He's cross as an untamed bearcat. Did you see how he glowered at Eagle when Eagle ran over into his territory to grab that fly? Don't suppose he's jealous, do you?"

"Naw! What's he got to be jealous about?" scoffed Lou Perry at second, lunging at a smartly hit ball which whizzed past him into right field.

The player who had lost the captaincy stood watching the ball which bounded across the closely cropped grass toward him. He stooped down as it reached him and made a one-handed pick-up, straightening to hurl the ball viciously back at Perry, who was not set for such unexpected speed. The ball smacked into the second baseman's hands and out again with a

cracking report, causing team-mates to glance Perry's way surprisedly.

"There—what did I tell you?" called Chic, in a low voice. "Wally's sore clean through about something and he's trying to take it out on us!"

"Be yourself, Wally! Be yourself!" howled Perry, nursing a palm tenderly. "What you got against me?"

A grin spread over the face of the right fielder—a not too pleasant grin. He made no answer but turned his back on the diamond and wandered off toward the fence, chewing on a blade of grass. This was *fine* stuff! So the fellows actually had considered him second to Eagle! Second! And here he was the team's leading batter! Just as good a fielder as Eagle, too! Of course he didn't have Eagle's great throwing arm. That was the reason Eagle had been placed in center field. Many times his accurate right wing had cut runners off who were attempting to take extra bases on hits or advance after the catch of sacrifice flies. However, aside from this one advantage, he—Wally—felt certain he was the better player.

His work in right field was not so spectacular, but the distinct edge he held in batting should alone have been enough to have decided the captaincy in his favor. So thought the aggrieved and inconsolable star batter of the Baldwin High team, not being able to see, in his greatly depressed mood, that the captaincy had not been decided on the score of personal ability but rather on the basis of personal liking. And it was here, considered as man to man, that Wally had fallen.

Coach Jedele, giving close attention to the last real workout before the opening game of the season, had reason to be pleased with the early form which the team, as a whole, was showing. Morris Baker, southpaw pitcher, gave evidence of developing the control which he had lacked his first two years and, this gained, the coach was certain Baker could be depended on to rate with the best high-school twirlers. And, in his opinion, few much better outfielders had ever crossed a school diamond than Eagle Carver and Wally Coburn! This trio formed the real backbone of the pres-

ent nine which Coach Jedele was building—a backbone which, with the aid of six other sturdy vertebræ he hoped would be able to withstand the punches of all opponents.

In the locker room that evening the coach called Wally Coburn aside.

"See here, Wally," he said. "What was the idea of your conduct out there on the field a little while ago?"

The star right fielder started.

"My—my conduct? I don't get you . . ."

"You *get* me all right," returned the coach, with emphasis. "Stow that grouch. It isn't natural. It isn't good for the rest of the team, either. And don't let me catch you burning balls back to the infield without giving warning. You were almost on top of Perry when you cut loose with all that steam. It might have put him on the bench. We've got a stiff season laid out ahead and we've got to be considerate of the other fellow if we hope to come through."

"Is that all?" asked the player who had lost the captaincy, edging away sullenly.

"Yes—that's all . . . for now."

Coach Jedele watched Wally jam his suit and shoes into the locker and leave the room. Then the coach scratched a prominent portion of his head speculatively. What on earth . . .?

Wally entered the Bingham game with a savage desire to make a showing which would completely eclipse anything that Eagle might do. Bingham, a smaller school, usually afforded about as much opposition as Baldwin cared to face in her opening game. And this year Bingham brought to Emerson Field a nine which gave Baldwin considerably more than she had bargained for. At the end of the fifth inning Bingham was traveling along, enjoying a 5 to 1 lead, thanks to the deceptive underhand shoots of their pitcher, Torrence, and the not so effective twirling of Dan Cort, whom Coach Jedele had started for Baldwin, intending to finish with Southy Baker. Bingham's five runs were gleaned in the first two innings, Cort being touched for six hits and having generously issued three bases on balls besides dusting off a batsman. And so Coach Jedele, in an effort to save Baldwin the ignominy of

opening the season with a defeat, had rushed Southy Baker from the bull pen. But, as the game settled down to a pitcher's battle, spectators began to feel that Southy's insertion into the proceedings had come too late. Torrence, Bingham moundsman, was pitching one whale of a game. Baldwin's two singles, both of which had been garnered by Wally Coburn, amply testified to this. One of the singles, in the last of the fifth, had scored Eagle who had gained first on an infield error and stolen second.

"Come on, fellows," urged Eagle, as the team left the bench to give Bingham their bats at the start of the sixth. "Let's get to this funny ball Torrence is pitching. We ought to be able to spot Bingham four runs and beat 'em. Torrence isn't much of a puzzle to Wally. We can solve him, too!"

"*Can* you?" thought Wally, secretly pleased, as he trotted out to his position. "Well, I could tell you something right now about how to hit this baby. And if I was captain . . .!"

Came the last of the eighth, with Baldwin growing desperate. The home hopes had

picked up one more run in the seventh when Chic Redman and Matt Scudder had gotten to Bingham's underhanded artist for hits and Eagle had scored Chic from third on a long sacrifice fly. Wally had then ended the inning on a drive which seemed ticketed for extra bases but which was captured instead on a circus catch by the Bingham left fielder, out near the fence.

"Just my luck!" grumbled Wally, stopping short as he neared second and trotting out to right field. "If that wallop had gone for a hit I'd have had a chance at a perfect average for the day!"

"Break up this ball game!" ordered Coach Jedele, registering disgust. "That pitcher has you buffaloed. All in the world he's got is an upshoot. It's a matter of timing. Once start meeting his underhanded slants and you'll kill 'em!"

Admittedly, but Baldwin just couldn't connect, and the eighth inning ended, Bingham leading, 5 to 2.

"What do you know about this?" sang out a Baldwin rooter. "They're slipping us the meat

chopper. Looks like Bingham's going to take us, for the first time in history. And here the papers have been shouting about our having the brightest baseball prospects in years! What a laugh!"

"It's a darn good game just the same," replied another fan. "If Southy'd been in there at the start! Do you realize he's pitched shut-out ball?"

"All I realize is that we're three runs behind and the old ninth inning's rolled around," answered the first rooter. "Yea, Southy!" he yelled, as the lead-off Bingham batter went back to the bench on strikes. "You're right, buddy, Southy *is* pitching a sweet game. He sure doesn't deserve to have lost it!"

"So you're one of *those* guys, eh!" retorted the more loyal fan. "Well, postpone your burial till the patient's clear dead, will you?"

Bingham, even more baffled with Southy's left-handed flinging than Baldwin had been against Torrence's whizzing, underhanded pitches, expired in order in their half of the ninth and took the field, determined to hold

their lead. The Bingham players were wild with suppressed joy and excitement. If they could weather this one more inning their cup would be full to overflowing. Though they might lose every remaining game on their schedule, the fact that they had defeated a nine which usually rated among the best in the state would be achievement enough.

"Hold 'em, boys!" cried an exultant Bingham merchant who had followed the team. "I've got a swell new necktie for each one of you!"

"We'll banquet 'em at the Lions Club!" proposed another booster, hilariously.

"Yea, Bingham!" cheered the school contingent.

And, spurred on by the nearness of victory, Bingham's defense stiffened. Harve Cody's drive to short was gobbled up on a dazzling play, the ball relayed to first beat him by a step. One down. Only two more! Southy Baker up, but a pinch hitter was needed. Coach Jedele called on Pat Reynolds, substitute fielder. Reynolds out, second to first.

"All right, Tory, old man!" called the Bing-

ham catcher. "We've got the big two for you. Here's number three. Who wants him?"

Chic Redman, first in the batting order, picked up his stick. A glum line of Baldwin men sat in the dugout, staring out at the diamond, berating themselves for their failure to have come through. Coach Jedele himself sat motionless.

"Get on, Chic!" intreated Eagle, but his tone was tinged with hopelessness.

"That bird Torrence is a cinch to hit," said Wally to himself. "I wonder why Coach hasn't seen it? Then, too, if Eagle was what he was cracked up to be. . . ."

The fellow who had wanted to be captain jumped from the bench and hurried over to Coach Jedele.

"Coach," he said, tensely, "I think I've gotten onto how to hit Torrence. If you'll just have Chic take his stand ahead of the plate. Torrence has been shooting the balls shoulder high and close-in. Out in front you've got a chance to catch it waist high . . ."

"Hear that, Chic?" accepted the Coach. "Sounds reasonable. Try it out."

Wally returned to his seat on the bench and watched Chic enter the batter's box with breathless interest. On the first pitch Chic stepped into it and the ball shot through the infield like a streak. Baldwin supporters took a new lease on life as Chic pulled up on second. Matt Scudder made the lease more binding with a slashing single which brought Chic all the way home. Score, Bingham, 5; Baldwin, 3. A belated rally but really nothing for Bingham to worry about.

"Wally, you sure solved that boy Torrence," complimented Chic as he came in to the bench. "I could hit him every time up now. Why didn't you spill it sooner? We should have been working on him like this right along!"

Baldwin's star batter, selecting his stick, shrugged his shoulders.

"Wanted to make sure I was right first," he flung back as he trailed Captain Carver to the plate. But inwardly a gloating voice was saying to him: "I guess maybe things aren't breaking right now! Proof number one that you're the most valuable man on the team. And if Eagle can't produce this time up, after

the tip you've given, the game is lost, which doesn't make him look so good. But you've already shown that you knew your stuff and the fellows will have to give you credit. So will Coach Jedele!"

The captain, knocking the dirt off his cleats with his bat, a characteristic motion of his just before stepping into the box, faced the now faltering Bingham enigma with an attitude of grim determination.

"Sock it on the nose!" encouraged Matt Scudder, dancing around off second base. "He's blown up! He hasn't got a thing!"

The Bingham catcher stalked out to the mound to talk matters over. Bingham wasn't in any great danger yet, but the menace of Baldwin's star batter, standing not far from the plate, grinning and swinging three clubs, was something else again. If the present batter wasn't disposed of and the game ended, pitcher Torrence would have to deal with a man who had already gleaned three clean hits off his delivery. And this was a situation which even a team that figured it had the game in the bag, did not care to meet with. Tor-

rence himself, with a nervous glance in Wally's direction, indicated his concern.

"You've got 'em worried!" divined a hysterical Baldwinite. "Get on, Eagle, and leave it to Wally to tie her up!"

"I hope he does get on," wished Wally, his feeling against Eagle vanishing as the realization flashed of the opportunity which might be his. "So Coach said he was counting on me to bust up ball games," he reflected, thinking of the information Squint had passed on. "Just give me this chance!"

"Ball one!" cried the umpire.

Eagle had crowded forward ahead of the plate and Torrence, pitching carefully . . . too carefully . . . had driven the batter back with a ball which almost went for a wild pitch.

"He's going up, up, up!" chanted the Baldwin rooters, wildly.

Wally made a megaphone of his hands so that Torrence would be sure to hear.

"Wait him out, Eagle, old boy. He'll pass you. He wants to pitch to me. He's just crazy to pitch to me. And I'm crazy to bat against

him! Because when I bat against him it's going to be good-by ball game!"

"Pitch to me, Tory!" shouted the Bingham catcher. "Don't pay any attention to that hot air. Working hard, now, big fellow! Let him hit! We'll get him for you!"

"Ball two!"

Beads of perspiration stood out upon the Bingham pitcher's forehead. His only pinch situation of the game and still not alarmingly dangerous but it was beginning to get to him.

"Atta looking 'em over, Eagle!" called Wally. "Take two more. He couldn't find the plate with a compass!"

Torrence took his time, rubbing imaginary dirt off the ball, dusting his hand off in the grass back of the mound and adjusting his cap. But the effort did not succeed in steadying his nerves, for the next pitch was wide.

"Ball three!"

"Here goes your old ball game!" predicted Wally, tossing a bat in the air. "Get ready to go down, Eagle. You're going to get a free ticket!"

The Bingham catcher ran out for another

conference, a long-faced one this time. Much of the assurance evident earlier in the inning was gone. The Bingham infield looked strained and anxious. Matt Scudder picked up a clump of dirt and tossed it across the diamond.

"I take it back, Eagle," he shouted. "You won't have to sock it. He's getting generous. Going to make you a little present. All right. Let Wally give the apple a ride. It's all the same to us!"

A contest which had seemed distinctly one-sided, due to Baldwin's tardy ability to get to pitcher Torrence, now took on a thrilling tensity. A situation was fast developing when almost anything might happen. The Bingham pitcher was obviously, without meaning to, nevertheless, trying his best to get himself in a hole. And he did it, with the fourth straight ball to Eagle, a pitch which so disgusted him that he stamped his foot in exasperation.

Grinning broadly, Baldwin's newly elected captain tossed his bat in to the bench and trotted down to first, clapping his hands together, which was the old familiar way of saying, "Fight 'em, gang! Fight!"

Now there were men on first and second and two down and Baldwin's heaviest slugger at bat! The tying runs on base. The most likely hitter on the team in position to pound these runs in.

"Yea, Wally!" roared the Baldwin supporters. "Put the old game on ice! Knock her out of the lot!"

"He can do it, too!" cried a spectator, excitedly. "I saw him do it four times last year."

"If I can do it," Wally said to himself as he stepped into the batter's box, "I've won this game single-handed. Guess that would be putting it up to Eagle pretty stiff. I'll set him such a hot pace folks'll wonder why they ever chose him captain!"

Pitcher Torrence eyed Baldwin's star batter with growing apprehension. In fact it might be said that the thing he had feared most had come upon him, for the sight of Wally's waiting to bat had considerably unnerved him. And his passing Eagle had placed him in the very predicament he had been anxious to avoid.

"Just stick it in here!" invited Wally, wav-

ing his bat across the plate, waist high, "and I'll lose it for you!"

The Bingham pitcher forced a grin and gave a contemptuous toss of the head. But he had not the least intention of grooving one. Pitching to this batter, who radiated self-confidence, would require crafty working of the corners. To put the ball where it should go called for almost perfect control. Torrence strove desperately to steady himself. His first pitch, consequently, cut the outside corner. Wally let it go by.

"Strike one!" bellowed the ump.

Baldwin's star batter pretended surprise.

"Well!" he called, "how did you do it?"

"Why, say!" lied the Bingham catcher, blusteringly, "we walked that other baby just to get you. You're easy!"

"Yea, Wally!" shrieked the Baldwin crowd. "Get a hit! Bring 'em in!"

Wally nodded grimly. He dusted off his hands and took a new grip on his bat. Torrence raised his arms up over his head, turned sidewise, then wheeled and pitched. The streak of white was high and close-in and would ac-

tually have gone for a ball if Baldwin's star batter had let it pass. But Wally, stepping back a trifle, gauged the path of the ball and timed his swing. There was a sharp crack, followed instantly after by two base runners in frenzied action. It was evident from the moment the ball lined over the infield that the drive was a hit. It struck out between right and center fields, almost directly between the fielders who had dashed madly toward it. A great cry went up as the fielders were seen to turn their backs on the diamond and give chase toward the center field fence. Baldwin's star batter was at this moment tearing around first base while Matt Scudder was gleefully scampering in home and Eagle Carver rounding third with what would be the tying run.

Disconsolately the Bingham pitcher watched the final ascension of his balloon in the hit which was to ruin what had given promise as the most perfect day in the athletic history of Bingham High. Before the fast bounding ball could be recovered it had rolled to the fence and Wally had propelled himself about the bases, sliding in home ahead of the throw.

"Didn't I tell you he could do it?" cried the spectator who had seen Wally do something similar four times last season. "Oh, what a swat! Believe me, that Wally Coburn's some boy!"

As Baldwin's star batter picked himself up and started for the bench he was met by a wild throng of admirers, eager to lift him to their shoulders. But ahead of all these was Captain Carver, holding out his hand and calling: "Great stuff, Wally! Marvelous!" But the fellow who had wanted to be captain managed to evade Eagle's proffered congratulations on the excuse of trying to dodge those who were making for him. He fought his way good-naturedly to the dugout as a dejected Bingham team trooped from the field, dazedly reflecting on their having been out in front, 5 to 2, with two men down in the last of the ninth. And now the scoreboard read, Baldwin, 6; Bingham, 5!

CHAPTER IV

WALLY IS BLAMED

THE *Baldwin Tribune* had much to say the following morning concerning the spectacular manner in which Coach Jedele's baseball nine opened the season against their annual opponents, the usually docile Bingham High. The *Tribune,* among other things, referred to Bingham as nothing short of slow poison, the effects of which a powerfully constituted home team was barely able to fight off in time to save its hide.

"Wally Coburn's terrific home-run clout came as the grand climax to one of the most exciting opening game finishes ever witnessed on Emerson Field," declared the *Tribune.* "Incidentally it was his fourth hit of the contest and augurs well for a continuance of the batting honors which Baldwin's star right fielder annexed last year. Southy Baker shared the greatest glory with Wally by pitching an early

season masterpiece in holding Bingham scoreless from the second inning on, after Bingham had jumped on Dan Cort for all their five runs."

Reading the account brought to Wally a peculiar measure of satisfaction. Not a word had been said about Captain Eagle Carver. The fellow his team-mates had chosen as leader had failed to secure so much as one hit. A few more games like this one and Eagle's prestige would be sadly on the wane. Wonder what Eagle thought of the way the Baldwin fans tried to mob him after his home-run clout? Maybe Eagle wouldn't have liked to smack that home run himself! And then to think that the whole team really had Wally to thank for the victory. That must gall him, too. But leave it to Eagle to cover! Look how he'd tried to shake hands at the plate and hog the limelight.

In reflecting, Wally was sorry for only one thing. It had been foolish of him to have shown his temper that day in practice when he had burned the ball in from the outfield to Lou Perry. That's where Eagle was wise. Hereafter he'd have to take a page from Eagle's

notebook. Though Eagle must have recognized him as a rival he had never acted toward him as though he were. This attitude kept Eagle in good with his team-mates. Consequently, any flash of temper on Wally's part only served to make him look bad. And Wally didn't have it in for anyone but Eagle. He couldn't afford, either, to get the other fellows against him.

"Harve Cody's cool toward me, as it is," ruminated Wally. "And I thought I could count on Harve, no matter what happened. But I won't forget for some time his making the motion that nominations be closed, which cut me out of any chance of my name being proposed! When you consider what friends we'd been, I'd call that a dirty trick!"

Resentment, nursed along from day to day, is bound to kindle more and more fire. But Wally, in the days that followed, took great care that the fire, though smoldering, was not permitted to break out. The fire had now taken on the undisguised forms of jealousy and hatred, yet—if there was any getting even to be done—it must be accomplished through crafty planning. Eagle must be hurt where

he would be hurt worst. The team must come to realize what a mistake it had made in the selection of its captain. But HOW? . . . Wally had kept up his batting rampage with a savagery which had brought delight to the school. This, however, didn't seem to be having the desired effect. And, all of a sudden, it dawned on Wally *why*. Baldwin, team-mates as well as rooters, had come to expect big hitting of him. Not only to expect it, but to count on it. Consequently, they didn't really appreciate how much his heavy hitting had meant to the team. All right, there was a way to prove to them beyond a doubt . . .!

The weeks brought contests with teams of increasing strength, in which Baldwin High's baseball nine revealed the fact that it was more than good. Southpaw Baker, as Coach Jedele had hoped, had rounded into rare form and was turning in some splendidly pitched games. As a consequence the town and school began to excite themselves about the possibility of a championship. And interest commenced to center upon the last game of the season . . . the clash with Preston City High's great nine

. . . an aggregation which had swept all teams before it. Sporting columns of state papers declared Preston City to be in possession of one of the best high-school teams in the country. Much emphasis was placed upon Preston City's heavy-hitting ability as a team. To date Preston had not scored less than five runs per game against all opposition, and this, in itself, gave evidence of the team's unusual power. The fact that Southpaw Baker had hung up a string of shut-outs only added to the quickening anticipation of the meeting. A championship would undoubtedly be at stake when Baldwin and Preston City tangled. And, in this eventuality, would Southpaw Baker be able to silence the batting artillery of the rival foe, thus bringing the most coveted laurels to his team and school? This was a question which began to be argued out on street corners, in store lounging places and private homes—all to no very satisfactory conclusion. One thing was certain, however: five runs, with the caliber of ball that the Preston City team was noted for playing, would be amply sufficient to win almost any game. Baker's chances of

scoring a shut-out against Preston were instantly despaired of—Baldwin fans clinging to the hope that Baker could confine Preston City's run-making to such a low margin as would enable Baldwin to come out on top.

And, while all this speculation was running rife, the Baldwin team suddenly hit a serious batting slump. More serious than this, Wally Coburn, Baldwin's star right fielder, was the worst offender. He had clouted the ball for better than a four hundred average all season, and then, all at once, dropped down below two hundred! Failure to come through in the pinches put other team members on their mettle, threw them off their stride and brought about the general decline in hitting. Several little-feared teams were defeated by such low scores as 1 to 0, 2 to 1 and 3 to 2. It was games such as these which placed a great strain upon Southpaw Baker, who had expected to breeze through the contests in easy fashion, saving himself for the harder struggles to come. It was also such games as these which placed every member of the team on edge . . . caused them to grow irritable . . . and

to approach the verge of going to pieces.

Coach Jedele tried benching some of his regulars and giving ambitious substitutes a chance, all to no purpose. The substitutes, overanxious to produce, fell down even more miserably than the players whose positions they filled. If Wally Coburn, who had been Baldwin's heaviest hitter, was not hitting . . . how could the others expect to hit? No, sir. The team was hoodooed somehow. Somebody had done something or had neglected to do something, or the signs of the zodiac were not favorable or . . . Well, the situation was two times worse than desperate, that's all. Baldwin, hanging onto what claim she had to a baseball title—hanging on by the thinnest skin of her teeth—and now down to the last game before the big battle with Preston City!

"When Babe Ruth went to pieces the New York Yankees went to pot," observed Knox, reporter for the *Baldwin Tribune*. "Wally Coburn was our Babe Ruth, and it's my humble opinion that he'll have to start pounding the old apple again before the rest of the team picks up."

"It's about time!" exclaimed Baldwin's former star batter, when this admission appeared in cold print. "Took almost the whole season to make 'em see it. But I guess now they're beginning to wake up to how valuable I was to the team!"

The path Wally had traveled to accomplish his end had been a lonely one. From a player who had chummed with his fellows in carefree abandon, he had gradually drifted into keeping his own company and his own counsel. Even Squint Pickens, loyal mascot, on whom he had counted for companionship and sympathy, had acted sort of distant, as though he would like to avoid him whenever possible. And yet he had not done anything actually out of the way. There had been no outward act to reveal how he might have felt inwardly, with the one exception of his flash of temper after Eagle had been elected captain. But Wally was convinced the fellows had long since forgotten that. He was treated the same as ever by the gang, now, for that matter. The only difference was really with him, for he did not have the same desire to mix. Let the bunch rally around Eagle.

They selected him because they'd evidently wanted him. He, Wally, would remain in the background. He'd make the fellows come to him next time. And it began to look, with the Preston City game looming on the horizon, as if that time was fast approaching. This news item would help crystallize public sentiment. The burden of winning the Preston City game would be placed largely on him. Eagle Carver, with all his fielding ability and his great throwing arm, had not been able to produce outstandingly at bat. He had a more than three hundred average, but, with the chance to offset the slump of Baldwin's star batter, he had slipped with the rest of the team.

"I wouldn't want Baldwin to lose," Wally told himself, as he viewed the situation with grim satisfaction. "But they've had a taste now of how little they can do without me or when I'm off my stride! Let Eagle swallow this!"

Coach Jedele, frankly puzzled as to what had caused Wally's alarming decline in batting, had, in keeping with his policy, refrained from appearing concerned about it. Most athletes suffered a loss of form from time to time and

teams just had to make the best of it. This Baldwin had done, Coach Jedele studying Wally's every move the while, endeavoring to see if there were some batting habit he had fallen into which could account for the slump. But there was none. The only change to be noticed was a change in demeanor. Wally seemed more sober, more tense. And yet this attitude might easily have been brought on by his worry over the dropping off of batting power. Or—and here was a new and sudden thought—could it be possible that the attitude itself might have been responsible for the trouble? Coach Jedele determined to find out. At the last practice before the game with Mackland High, he asked Baldwin's star right fielder to remain after the rest had gone.

"What's worrying you, Wally?" were the coach's first words.

Wally glanced at the coach, startled. Then, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, gave answer. "Nothing."

"I know better."

The fellow who thought he should have had the captaincy made no reply to this.

"You're playing as though your heart isn't in the game. That's not like you, Wally. You've got the whole team up in the air. The other schools have begun calling us the hitless wonders. But no hitless wonders are ever going to defeat Preston City. We've been darn lucky to come through as we *have!*"

"Why pick on me?" flashed Wally, secretly pleased. "What about Eagle? He . . ."

Coach Jedele's brows lifted. So! An unguarded moment and Baldwin's leading batsman had revealed the cause of his slump. Hmmm! Better not charge Wally with this, though. Just now the star right fielder felt that he held the whip hand. The situation was a ticklish one. And, in that moment, Coach Jedele realized that he was taking the wrong course with Wally. Now that the cause was unmasked, it was easy to see that Baldwin's star right fielder was flattered at the attention being paid him; the importance placed upon his drop in batting; the fact that the team looked to him and not to Eagle for support as the crucial game approached. This being the case, it was obvious that the only way to cure

Wally, if he could be cured, was to ignore his actions completely. Regardless of Wally's real worth to the team, he would have to see that he was but one of the nine. If he didn't, well—one did not have to enter the realms of higher mathematics to figure that such an attitude was heading Baldwin's championship hopes straight toward the much abused scrap heap.

The Baldwin baseball squad caught an early morning train Saturday for Mackland, scene of their next diamond encounter. Team members were in exceeding good spirits, for the contest with Mackland High was regarded as nothing more than an exerciser for the big battle to come with Preston City. The season, thus far, had been a hectic one, but Baldwin, though experiencing a number of tight squeezes, had edged through to an unblemished record. This was something worth shouting about when it was considered that Preston City was the only other undefeated team in the state. Today, by way of celebrating, team-mates had pledged one another to rouse themselves from their batting

sluggishness with an orgy of hitting. The staging of a real field day at bat would be the finest kind of a warning challenge to Preston City.

"You're about due for a couple of home runs!" reminded Lou Perry, jabbing Wally's mid-section. "What's the matter, old fire eater? Someone throw some water on you? I'll make you a bargain. For every home run you make I'll match it with a two-bagger! That's fair enough, isn't it? You're twice as good a hitter as I am . . . that is, you were until . . ."

The gang, crowding one end of the passenger coach, laughed.

"There's not one among us that's as good as he was," confessed Matt Scudder. "But I'll tell you this, Lou . . . I'll smack a single for every double you make!"

"See what I started!" joshed Baldwin's second baseman. "A couple more volunteers and we'll have Mackland beaten without playing 'em!"

"What you going to do, Eagle?" called Chic

Redman to Baldwin's captain, who sat quietly gazing out the car window.

"Me?" rejoined Eagle, vaguely. "Oh, I'll draw a base on balls for every single Matt gets."

More laughter.

"Only one sliver in the woodpile about this arrangement," said Harve Cody, dryly. "If Wally doesn't start things with a homer, the rest of us aren't supposed to follow. I don't like that. We may have to wait too long."

"I don't care what arrangement you fellows make," put in Southpaw Baker, "just so you get to hitting. I'd like to win a game once without having to pitch my head off the whole distance!"

"All right, Southy," promised Wally, with just a touch of the condescending. "I'll see what I can do!"

Then it was that the fellow who had wanted to be captain chanced a glance at the fellow who was captain and discovered that fellow to be looking at him, the expression on his face seeming to say, "What a big piece of cheese you are!" It was with difficulty that Wally

smothered a hot wave of resentment. Naturally Eagle must be thinking mean things of him, especially on seeing how the boys who had elected him captain were now commencing to flock around the one they should have chosen. Say, this was getting good! One of these days even the apparently imperturbable Captain Carver might be led to reveal his real feelings and break out against Baldwin's star batter. And, when and if this happened, Wally knew that his triumph would be complete!

As if in answer to a fervent though not particularly healthy desire, a glorious opportunity for just such an outbreak of feeling developed in the game with Mackland. Baldwin, first at bat, was leading Mackland, 2 to 0, in Mackland's half of the sixth inning, Southpaw Baker being well on the way to another shutout.

"What a fine lot of promisers!" he razzed good-naturedly, as the hitless wonders appeared to be in for another tight contest. "I thought you were going to sock the ball!"

"Plenty of time yet," answered Lou Perry, with a lame attempt at humor, but Baldwin

team-mates were taking the matter pretty seriously now. What was wrong with them? Why couldn't they snap out of it? Carlin, Mackland pitcher, wasn't supposed to be so much. They should be hitting him all over the lot. Instead they had scored a run in the third and another in the fourth, both the result of infield bobbles after scratch hits.

And now Mackland High was upsetting the dope by putting on a batting rally against Southy Baker, who could hardly be blamed if he had become a bit discouraged at being forced to carry the load each game. Two clean singles and a well-executed bunt down the third base line filled the bases, with two out. And Mackland supporters yelled lustily for any little hit which could easily tie the score.

The hit came but it was no little one. It was a high and mightily driven fly between right and center fields and the instant the ball left the bat Baldwin's two fielders started running backward. As the ball shot out beyond the infield, it started curving more and more to the right and Eagle, seeing this, called to Wally.

"Take it! It's yours!"

Both fielders were practically under the drive, wheeling for the catch, Wally perhaps two steps nearer. Because this out would be the third one, Mackland base runners had started circling the paths at the crack of the bat and two of them had already crossed the plate with the other now rounding third and glancing back hopelessly over his shoulders as he saw the fielders camped under the sky-scraping fly. But then there occurred something which revived the faith of Mackland supporters in Santa Claus and reminded them of famous old funny paper characters named Alphonse and Gaston. For, with what looked to be a perfect, "You first, my dear fellow!" and, "No, I insist that you catch it, my dear Gaston!" Baldwin's right and center fielders permitted the ball to drop between them and roll all the way to the fence! By the time they had retrieved it, a delirious Mackland crowd was raving over three runs scored. There was small consolation for Baldwin that Eagle, in a desperate attempt to retrieve, had made one of the most marvelous throw-ins of his career, his tremendous peg catching the batter of the

ill-fated fly at the plate and cutting off another run which might ordinarily have been added. The fact remained that the ball should easily have been caught. But, so far as the two fielders themselves were concerned, it was evident that the question as to which should have caught the ball was a matter of dispute.

On the way in to the bench Wally assailed a tight-lipped Eagle.

"That was your ball, old man! Why didn't you take it?"

"It wasn't my ball," denied the fellow who had been elected captain. "You were nearer it. I yelled for you to grab it. Besides, it was in your field."

"All right, then . . . what were you doing, running over into my territory?"

"Because, when the ball was hit, it was mine as much as it was yours, depending on which of us could get in position for the catch first. But then the ball commenced curving your direction . . ."

"And you kept right on going after it! Got in my way!" charged Wally, hotly.

"I kept on so as to back you up," explained

Eagle, in deadly even tones. "What are you trying to do, Wally? Shoulder the blame for your bonehead off onto me?"

"My bonehead!" raved the fellow who had wanted to be captain. "We'll see who made the bonehead! We'll settle this little argument right now!"

By this time the two wrangling fielders were approaching the Baldwin dugout, smartingly conscious that rooters were yelling taunting things at them. Wally had accompanied his protests with emphatic gestures which had conveyed to the crowd the exact nature of his heated discussion with Eagle.

"What's the matter out there! Can't you guys get together?" cried a spectator.

"Get together?" laughed a second spectator. "That's just what they don't want to do. The trouble they're having is in keeping apart! A little more and they'd have bumped heads!"

"Yeah, and right now they'd probably like to *punch* heads!" observed a third.

"Thanks for the three runs!" called out a Mackland fan.

Wally, hands on the roof of the dugout, about to step down to the bench, glared defiance. Mackland rooters howled.

"Good-by, Baldwin!" they chanted. "You're up in the air now and you're never coming down!"

Boiling inwardly, Baldwin's star right fielder strode to the end of the bench where Coach Jedele was seated.

"Coach," he said, tensely, as fellow players eyed him sullenly. "Whose ball was that, Eagle's or mine?"

The briefest second of silence followed, during which Coach Jedele raised his head to look searchingly at the questioner.

"Your ball, of course," came the answer. "What happened? Did you suddenly freeze to one spot?"

"But I . . . but Eagle . . .!" started Wally, in blind fury. "He shouldn't have . . ."

"Eagle played the drive exactly right," defended the coach. "He stopped dead a couple feet from you when he saw you were under the

ball and I heard him yell, clear in here, for you to 'take it.' You had no excuse for letting it drop!"

Angry and chagrined, Baldwin's star right fielder whirled about, walked to the water bucket and sloshed water over the sides with a sweeping motion of the dipper.

"Well, I'll be hog tied!" he exclaimed, bitterly.

But that which hurt more than the coach's refusal to vindicate his contention, was the coach's remark, made now, to Baldwin's captain.

"Carver, that peg to the plate was the prettiest play of its kind I ever saw. That was a great recovery and a great throw."

"Some guys get all the breaks," Wally told himself as he slumped down on the bench. "But if Eagle thinks he can get away with this stuff any longer he's very much mistaken!"

CHAPTER V

AN ACCUSATION

Baldwin tied the score at three all in their half of the seventh. A triple and a sacrifice fly did the business.

"Anybody's game yet," said a spectator.

"Not if we can hit another fly out between right and center fields," rejoined a Mackland fan.

Those within hearing distance laughed.

But there was little danger of Baldwin's obliging right fielder duplicating his performance. In fact he was itching for an opportunity to atone by gobbling in drives which might be ticketed for hits.

"Let 'em pop to me!" he shouted to Southy, as Baldwin's veteran left-hander recovered his effectiveness by setting Mackland batters down in order.

And so the ninth inning came and went with the two teams still deadlocked.

"We'll beat 'em in over innings," predicted a Mackland supporter, with enthusiasm. "Our boy Carlin just begins to get good about now."

Unfortunately, however, Carlin was feeling the strain more than he had indicated. Or else Baldwin batters, hitherto almost hypnotized, suddenly commenced to regain their batting eyes. At any rate, with one down in the first half of the tenth, Matt Scudder singled through the box. Lou Perry, next up, whom Coach Jedele had advanced from fifth to third place in the batting order at the start of the game, topped the ball unexpectedly and reached first without drawing a throw on what was recorded as a bunt.

"Atta boy, Lou!" cried Eagle.

It was the Baldwin captain himself who had fallen in the batting order from third to fifth and yet he seemed to be accepting the shake-up without feeling.

"I'll bet he could really bite nails," thought Wally, who, despite his loss of batting power, had been continued in the clean-up position. The fact remained that coach hadn't found anyone else on whom he could depend to de-

liver long drives when needed. And here was a made-to-order opportunity! The chance to step into the rôle of hero in one swing. A chance to undo all that had been done . . . to make folks forget the dropping of the fly ball and to think only of the smash which won the game!

"Come on, Wally!" entreated Eagle. "Bring 'em in! Break up this old ball game!"

Baldwin's former star batter grinned as he started toward the plate. He'd purposely laid low on hitting, had given his team-mates every chance to win the game in other innings. And now that they had failed, this was a time when he would make every effort to come through.

"Been waiting for a chance like this for weeks," Wally told himself. "No wonder Eagle's pulling for me to hit. If I don't do something it'll pass the buck up to him! And he'd sure hate to fall down again!"

Before entering the batter's box Wally tossed aside two bats and paid particular attention to the stick he retained. This was a moment that he intended to make the most of.

He had the consciousness that all eyes were upon him. One out, men on first and second and the fellow who had been Baldwin's heaviest batter at the plate. A clouter to be feared regardless of the slump he was supposed to be in. Wally saw the Mackland pitcher sizing him up soberly. Then something happened which was destined to give Baldwin's right fielder the shock of his career.

"Wally!" came a cry from the bench.

About to step into the batter's box, Wally stopped abruptly and glanced over his shoulder. The voice sounded like that of the coach. Probably a signal. Instead, Baldwin's star batter saw Pat Reynolds, substitute fielder, pick up a bat and run from the dugout toward the plate. Wally's jaws opened and his glance became a petrified stare. Coach Jedele was jabbing his arm in an unmistakable gesture. And yet the whole procedure was so bewildering, so impossible, that Baldwin's clean-up hitter could do nothing but stand, frankly dumbfounded.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded, as Pat Reynolds strode up.

"I'm hitting for you," Pat announced, his face flushed.

"You? Hitting for me?" repeated Wally, unbelievingly. "You're crazy! . . . You've got your orders mixed. You're hitting for Eagle. He's up next."

Baldwin's star batter pushed the substitute hitter from the plate and stepped into the box, facing the pitcher.

"Coburn!" came a sharp voice from the dugout. "Get out of there. Let Reynolds hit!"

A whiplash could hardly have stung more. The words brought a flash of humiliation followed by a thundering rage. What did Coach Jedele mean? Was this the penalty he was imposing for the fielding misplay? If so, it was grossly unfair. The idea of sending in a pinch hitter for the team's leading batter! Not only that, but waiting till the last second so that the substitution would be most conspicuous! Wally looke his defiance toward the bench.

"I'm batting," he declared, refusing to give ground.

The umpire walked around the catcher, tap-

ping the roiled Baldwin batsman on the shoulder.

"You heard your orders," he snapped. "Make way for this hitter!"

"But I . . . but isn't it too late?" appealed Wally.

"Beat it!" jollied the Mackland catcher. "You've been a false alarm all day!"

"Is that so? I'll show you!"

"You're all the same to us!" continued the backstop. "So chase yourself and give the poor sub a chance, won't ya?"

With signs of an altercation developing, Captain Carver projected himself into the affair. He took Baldwin's former star batter by the arm.

"Pipe down, Wally," he commanded quietly. "Coach has a reason or he wouldn't be doing it. Don't make a scene!"

Gloweringly, grudgingly, the fellow who had wanted to be captain gave up his position at the plate. He brushed shoulders roughly with a now decidedly nervous recruit who hesitated uncertainly before entering the batter's box.

"You wait!" he flung back, as he set off toward the bench. "I'll see about this!"

"B-a-a-a-a-a-h, Coburn!" sung out Mackland supporters, guyingly, as the Baldwin right fielder was seen to approach Coach Jedele, protesting violently.

"That fellow's quite a sorehead, isn't he?" remarked a Mackland fan.

"Say!" cried the injured Wally, oblivious to all but the great injustice being done him. "You can't do this, coach! Put someone in to bat for me! What have I done? Isn't there a mistake? I told Pat . . ."

"Sit down!" broke in the coach, coldly. "And keep still!"

"But *he* can't hit!" objected Wally, frenziedly. "I'm three times the batter he is! . . . I tell you, coach . . .!"

"Who's running this team?" demanded Coach Jedele. "Another word from you and you're out for the season!"

Wilbur, substitute infielder, pulled at the overheated veteran's trouser leg. "Coach means business," he whispered. "Better hold it!"

Realizing the futility of further protest, Baldwin's former star batter sank down on the bench as the game was resumed amid the excited cries of the crowd.

"Coach has had it in for me all year," he announced bitterly. "That's the reason I've fallen off in hitting. But even that's no license for his . . ."

"Oh, dry up!" growled Dan Cort, relief pitcher. "Who do you think you are, anyway?"

Dejectedly, Wally watched Pat Reynolds swing at two wide balls. The substitute was going to strike out. At least he hoped so. If the coach had ever tried to take his clean-up hitter out of the game on the home grounds the fans wouldn't have let him. They'd have howled the substitution down. But here, in Mackland, coach could get away with it. There was only a comparative handful of Baldwinites present. And these, while astounded at this unusual strategy, couldn't raise much fuss. They weren't raising any, at any rate.

"Look 'em over, Pat!" begged fellow teammates from the dugout. "Make 'em be good!"

It was anything but an easy assignment to have been sent in to bat for him who had been the team's leading batter. The utility outfielder secured a grip on himself with difficulty. He almost swung at two more bad balls. With the count two and two, he hit.

"Yea, Pat!"

It was a sizzling drive to deep short which the shortstop knocked down but could not field in time to get the batter at first or make a play at any base. All hands safe, bases loaded, only one down . . . and Captain Carver up!

"The lucky stiff!" mumbled Wally, sensing a pang of disappointment. "Oh, well, here's Eagle. No runs scored yet and if Eagle blows in this pinch!"

But Eagle didn't blow. He rapped the first ball solidly, driving it on a line over second base for a long two-bagger which cleaned the sacks! Three runs in! Wally groaned.

"Great stuff, Eagle!" called Harve Cody from the bench. "I guess that's putting the old game on ice!"

"Huh! I'd have put the game on ice just

as easily if coach had only let me bat," thought Wally, glumly.

With the damage done, Baldwin's next two hitters went out in order, leaving Eagle stranded on third base, and the game went into the last half of the tenth with Baldwin leading, 6 to 3. Southpaw Baker, bearing down, showed Mackland no mercy, permitting not so much as a life on first. The final out put another hard-fought game in Baldwin's bag. "Fine work, boys!" congratulated Coach Jedele. "Looks to me like you've recovered your batting form!"

Elated at the outcome of the game, the coach was secretly more elated at the manner in which Dame Fortune had joined hands with him in bringing the conceited right fielder down several pegs. Unquestionably, Wally had been given a few sizable things to think about during the week to come. And if the former star batsman were not hopelessly pig-headed, the chances were he would take a fall to himself. Such doses as had just been forced upon him were directly in line with the treatment which the coach had prescribed after dis-

covering Wally to be a victim of "egotistitis," an old disease clothed in a new word.

After the game, in the clubhouse, the fire no longer smoldering, Wally sought Eagle out. His eyes blazed as he renewed the quarrel. Fellow players crowded about, anticipating blows. Coach Jedele, about to enter and glimpsing the altercation, craftily turned his steps away. This was great. Let the fire burst forth in all its fury and be done with it! The sooner Wally got rid of his jealousy and hatred the better. It was like having the measles. A person was a good deal sicker before breaking out than after. Wally was taking the cure beautifully. The only tough part about it was the fact that Eagle would be forced to bear the brunt of the outburst. But the coach guessed that Eagle could thoroughly take care of himself.

"You're back of this!" charged Wally, hotly. "Trying to queer me, aren't you?"

The fellow who had been chosen captain did not so much as dignify the accusation with an answer. He turned his back on his accuser

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"I'll show you!" was his parting gun, the fracas subsiding with the fellow who had wanted to be captain dressing in a corner of the locker room by himself, mad at the world.

CHAPTER VI

TO SETTLE A GRIEVANCE

THERE was a crowd at the train to greet the home-coming Baldwin High team. Everybody loved a winner and Coach Jedele's early season prediction that his boys would give a good account of themselves had proved true. It had been some years since Baldwin High could claim a record even approaching this one, and now, if the record could only be topped off by a win over the crack Preston City nine, Baldwin citizens were almost prepared to set the town on fire.

"Captain Carver Clinches Game with Screaming Two-Bagger," said the *Baldwin Tribune*. "Team Regains Batting Eye in Tenth Inning to Drive in Three Runs. Battle Royal Promised in Game Next Saturday Against Champion Preston City Outfit."

The only bug in an otherwise agreeable ointment was the fact that the game with Preston

City was to be played at Preston City and sport authorities always gave to the home team a shade the advantage. There was supposed to be a something about the atmosphere of a home crowd, the familiar surroundings, even down to the blades of grass in the outfield, which materially aided the home team. Why, didn't everyone remember how the Washington Senators had beaten out the New York Giants on two hits which took freak bounds over third baseman Lindstrom's head? And wasn't that memorable twelve inning game, with Walter Johnson doing the relief hurling, played on Washington's own diamond? Do you mean to tell any of the Giants that, if the game had been played at the Polo Grounds those freak bounds would have occurred? Well, if they had, the Giants would have been the ones to make the hits, not the Senators! The breaks, by unwritten law or tradition or whatever you will, belong to the home team. And when a visiting nine, of about equal strength, can come off with a win, that aggregation—in the opinion of many—is doubly entitled to honors.

Coach Jedele, with a week in which to bring his first string squad to top form, began Monday with a stiff workout. He was a bit afraid of a let-down following the strong finish in the game with Mackland and desired to keep the boys traveling at high speed in practice, pepped up for the big battle of the year. Up to this last week before the all-important game, Coach Jedele had scarcely mentioned Preston City. It was his contention that the team had enough to do in meeting its opponents one by one rather than playing the game with Preston City day by day. He had seen teams who had "chewed the fat," as he called it, about an opposing nine until they had developed mental hazards which did more to defeat them than the actual foe. Baldwin High, however, was tackling Preston City with the thought that it was to be "just another game." Of course Baldwin was not unmindful that Preston City possessed a nine which commanded the highest respect, but Baldwin, nevertheless, wasn't worrying about the clash. And the putting in of "extra licks" in practice only meant that Coach Jedele was in-

sisting on the players' guarding against overconfidence.

Overconfidence! This, in itself, was funny, for, if any team deserved to be overconfident that team was Preston City rather than Baldwin. A comparison of their season's records disclosed that Preston City overpowered them in all departments save pitching. Here, Southpaw Baker's great hurling gave him the edge over Flint Craig, Preston ace. But then—Craig had not been called upon to extend himself as Baker had through the season. Most of Preston's City's victories had been one-sided, only two of their games having been won by one-run margins. It was therefore a trifle unfair as well as unwise to consider Baker better than Craig. Both had pitched well enough, under the circumstances, to have carried their teams through the season undefeated, and what, more than this, should be expected of any pitcher?

"Here's Preston's big hitter, Home Run Conklin, at bat!" called Coach Jedele, as he had his men in position for fielding practice. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Give him to me!" cried Lou Perry, at second, smacking his glove.

"I'll take him!" volunteered Matt Scudder, at short.

"Ho, aren't you even going to let him hit it out of the infield?" kidded the coach, raising his bat, ready to toss up the ball.

"Wherever he hits, we'll get him!" promised Chic Redman, at first.

"All right!" accepted the coach, tossing up the ball and drawing back his bat. "Here he goes!"

The Baldwin infield leaned forward, tensely alert; outfielders prepared to take to their heels. Coach Jedele, former big leaguer, took a vicious swing at the ball. Instinctively Baldwin's three outfielders started forward, then stopped short, grinning.

"I've got it!" shouted Harve Cody, running around in circles, back behind the plate.

"Some hitter, Home Run Conklin!" jeered Dolf Stoner, at third.

Cody camped under the high foul and caught it one-handed, bouncing the ball out of his mitt and back to the coach.

"Little luck on that one," conceded the coach. "But Conklin's up again in the fourth, sore as a boil. Look out for him this time!"

This time was right! Coach Jedele "leaned" on the next toss-up for a clout that shot high into the sky and far out over center field. Eagle Carver took one glance at the ball and then headed for the fence. He might as well have saved his breath, for, on reaching the fence, he still needed a ten-foot stepladder to have got his hands on the ball. It struck on the roof of a house across the street.

"Good night!" yelled the Baldwin captain. "If Home Run Conklin ever really pickles one like that!"

"Ought to had that one!" raved the coach, making a megaphone of his hands. "What's the matter out there, Eagle?"

The Baldwin captain made a helpless gesture with his hands as the squad laughed. In this manner did Coach Jedele drive his players without permitting them to take themselves too seriously.

The fellow who had wanted to be captain

felt much like an outcast following his run-in with Eagle. He had been the one to lose his head, of course, even though he had vowed that Eagle would make the next break. And, this time, Wally knew that his flare-up had cost him any remaining sympathy which might have existed for him among fellow team members. Too darn bad. Just when it appeared as though things were turning his way, too. But now Wally could sense that those with whom he had been more or less chummy were trying to steer clear of him. As for Squint Pickens, mascot, the one who had sounded out the team members as to their preference for captain; one whom he had felt he could count on through thick and thin—he had not seen Squint really to talk to for weeks!

"I'll have to corner Squint and find out what's the matter," Wally decided.

That night, with practice ended, Baldwin's star right fielder hurried across the diamond to fall in alongside the team mascot. He laid a roughly cordial hand on Squint's shoulder.

"Hello, old-timer!"

Wally felt the shoulder twitch instinctively

under his grip as the mascot looked up and saw who it was.

"Howdy, Wally."

The two walked toward the clubhouse in silence, Wally trying to adjust his steps to Squint's limping gait.

"What you been doing lately?" asked Baldwin's right fielder, finally. "Trying to give me a wide berth?"

"N-no," answered the team mascot, obviously ill at ease.

"I know better," insisted Wally. "Listen, Squint, we used to be what you'd call pals. What's the rub? What have I done?"

"N-nothing," rejoined Squint, reluctantly.

"See here, buddy. I've always wanted you to be outspoken, haven't I? . . . I've asked you to tell me straight . . . no beating around the bush. Something's wrong. I can feel it. Come across! What is it?"

The team mascot and the fellow who would have liked to be captain had reached the entrance to the clubhouse by now. Squint hesitated on the stone steps, eyeing his former idol a bit incredulously.

"Say!" he blurted out, impulsively. "You know what's wrong, same as everyone else. Only thing is you want me to tell you so's you can say there's nothing to it!"

Having fired this broadside, the team mascot vanished inside the door, leaving a much-concerned veteran smarting under the sting of the insinuation. So, beginning with Eagle, spreading to Harve Cody, his best friend, then being taken up by the coach, his team-mates and, lastly, coming down to Squint, he—Wally—had become completely in disfavor. The present captain of Baldwin High's team had played his cards craftily and well. But a day of reckoning was coming! All these little incidents were only pyramiding, building up more and more things for which he intended to get even.

Thursday, marking the last day of strenuous workouts in preparation for the championship contest with Preston City, Coach Jedele kept his players hard at it until the shadows had blanketed the diamond and crept far into the outfield. It was in the last half hour of

this long practice session that a significant something happened. Eagle and Wally, both chasing the same fly, collided heavily. As they arose, Eagle said reprimandingly, "That was my ball, Wally. You should have let me have it."

"Yeah!" flared Wally, hotly. "Like I did in that Mackland game and get the blame for it! Nothing stirring!"

The Baldwin captain retrieved the ball and hurled it back to the infield, then trotted over to the star right fielder.

"See here, Wally, I've taken about enough from you!"

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

The fellow who had wanted to be captain felt a surging wave of exultation. At last, Eagle was about to play into his hands.

"I'm willing to do anything you suggest . . . anything to get this foolishness over with." The Baldwin captain's voice was even and untainted by malice. He spoke as though resigned; as though facing a situation which he had decided was inevitable, willing to meet

it any way that seemed best for the other party concerned.

"I suppose you know I don't have any love for you," confessed Wally.

"Couldn't help but know that," smiled Eagle.

"Suppose you know *why?*"

"I can imagine. But what's the difference? You're sore and you want to get even. Well, what do you say to meeting me tonight after the boys have turned in, and our fighting it out?"

Wally considered. His eyes gleamed.

"Whereabouts?"

"Over there by the north gate."

"I'll be there!"

Any fellow who has nursed a grudge along for weeks can appreciate how glorious is the opportunity of taking this grudge out upon the individual against whom the grudge has been held. The late afternoon was called upon to witness, then, one of the strangest sights ever to take place on Emerson Field. Two evenly matched figures met by appointment, steal-

ing furtive glances about to be sure that they were unobserved by anyone else. This point determined, they prepared for action, stripping to their summer underwear as low as the waist.

"How long'll we fight?" asked Wally, glowering at the fellow who was team captain.

"Until one of us hollers 'quits,'" answered Eagle, grimly.

"Suits me!"

Wally struck the first blow. He advanced upon Eagle furiously, forcing the Baldwin center fielder on the defensive. Both players had had some boxing experience but neither had ever gone at an opponent with bare fists. It was evident from the start that Wally was out to punish Eagle quickly. And it took a few minutes of terrific milling before Wally suddenly discovered that Eagle was not trying to hit in return. Instead, the only effort Eagle was making was the effort to defend himself! He warded off blow after blow, smilingly. This but infuriated Wally the more. He had been tricked. Tricked into fighting Eagle when Eagle had not wanted to fight. Eagle

had suggested this in an effort to pacify him. Not because Eagle had any feeling in the matter. As far as feeling was concerned, Wally might as well have been giving battle to a cigar store Indian. The feeling was all on his side.

When some years younger, Wally had once passed through a swinging door, receiving a jarring bump on the head. The door had not meant to bump him, of course. In fact the poor door hadn't even been conscious of bumping him. Wally just hadn't gotten out of the way. But, because the door had bumped him, Wally sailed into it with both fists and the toes of both shoes. And Wally could remember having said to the door, in satisfied fashion some minutes later, "There, I guess you won't do that again!" Who knows? Perhaps the door smiled then as Eagle was smiling now. Darn the door! Darn anyone who could hurt him and not seem to mind it.

Wally's fist lunged out savagely and, this time, it connected. The Baldwin captain swung about dizzily, like a door torn from its hinges, and toppled over. The blow had

caught him on the point of the jaw. It had not knocked him entirely out, for he had tried to break his fall with his right arm. Dazedly Wally stood over the prostrate form of the fellow he was jealous of . . . the fellow he hated. Dazedly he saw the lips of the Baldwin captain pressed tight in pain. Dazedly he glimpsed his opponent struggle to his feet and endeavor to put up a defense. And then the dazed sensation cleared and he found himself suddenly devoid of the mad hatred which had possessed him. He backed away a step and stared at Eagle dumbly. The smile was gone from Eagle's face now. But he was game, standing by, waiting for Wally to resume the fight.

Somehow—Wally never knew just how—he signaled to Eagle that he had had enough. And somehow—Wally's memory was indistinct on this point, too—Eagle had gathered up his belongings and disappeared. The only thing that Wally was acutely conscious of was a sense of bitter disappointment. There was no real satisfaction in hitting a fellow who wouldn't fight back. No matter how much he

might have wanted to take it out on Eagle he couldn't really settle a grievance this way. Then a sudden, stabbing thought struck Wally. Perhaps he'd been outwitted again. Perhaps Eagle hadn't taken the offensive so that, if word leaked out about this, no blame could be attached to him. There was something mighty strange about it all.

"What a boob I am!" Wally berated himself. "There's nothing Eagle would rather do than get me banned from the team and if he's fixed it so that this gets to the coach, I'm through!"

CHAPTER VII

MUCH AT STAKE

THE imagination of one who believes an injustice has been done him, often exaggerates matters beyond all proportion. In Wally's case the situation had grown from day to day after the form of an ugly and expansive mushroom. The least little imagined slight or offense had been a drop of moisture which the mushroom of resentment soaked up greedily. And now the mushroom had become so deeply rooted in Wally's consciousness that it troubled him waking and sleeping. It weighted him down, overshadowing whatever thoughts he might have, casting a reflection upon everything that happened and coloring events with the false rays of suspicion. The monster he had created was all but devouring him.

It was a relief to Wally to learn that he was to play in the Preston City game. And, at the same time, it was vindication. For the mon-

ster talking, said to him, "They've got to play you whether they want to or not. You're indispensable to the team. Coach Jedele would give anything within reason for victory and, though he might like to take you out, he doesn't dare risk it. This is the day of days for you. Go in there and slug your head off! Win the big game single-handed. Make them take off their hats to you! You can do it! What do you care how they feel toward you? They're all jealous."

An overflow crowd greeted the Baldwin High team as it trotted onto the Preston City diamond fifteen minutes before game time. The crowd, swollen in size by a thousand rooters from Baldwin, was riotously expectant of a great battle. Preston City fans, however, outnumbering Baldwin some five to one, undertook to impress Baldwin with their noisy belief that the contest would be a walk-away for the home team.

But Preston City early abandoned this contention, for such reckoning had been made without duly considering the merits of one Morris Baker, developed into a southpaw

pitcher of no mean ability . . . and particularly ripe for this title clash. Baker's left-handed slants completely stood the Preston City nine on its respective ears for the first six innings, his pitching not permitting so much as a scratch hit. This exhibition from the mound far exceeded the fondest hopes of Baldwin fans, as Preston City's heavy hitting aggregation had been greatly feared. And gradually the thousand from Baldwin began to be heard above the five thousand home rooters.

Through the first six innings there had been much for Baldwin to rejoice over. Her team, thanks to the return to batting form of Wally Coburn, star right fielder, was coasting along on a four run lead. Think of it—four runs! Four to nothing at the end of the sixth! And Preston City eating from Southpaw Baker's hand. A few more nibbles and the game would be in the bag.

Ah, if the nibbles did not become bites! Preston, handcuffed at bat from trying to swing on Baker's offerings, now took to bunting. The first man in the last of the seventh went out on this attempt but the second

dumped a slow roller down the third base line and scratched the first hit of the game. Preston City cheered as though the player had smashed a home run. The batter who followed bunted down to Baker, who pegged wild in trying to cut the runner down at second. Too bad but still nothing to worry about. Preston City had only hit two balls as far as the outfield in the entire game. But, hello—here was a hit!

A hard drive to center field, deep and long. The men on first and second dug their toes into the dirt and started down the base lines. Out in center field the fleet figure of Eagle Carver caught up to the ball and picked it up on the bound, straightening to throw. The Preston City coach, on the third base coaching line, extended his arms, beseeching the base runners to pull up. Take no chances with a fielder who had the marvelous throwing arm that Eagle had. Better be satisfied with holding third and second and the batter getting credit for a long single than attempting to go home and have the batter try for a double. Such was the respect which the powerful right

arm of the Baldwin captain commanded.

What was that? What was the center fielder up to? Running in with the ball and tossing it underhanded to the second baseman! Wild-eyed, the coach at third waved the runner in. The second baseman, turning, pegged. But the ball smacked into the catcher's mitt as the runner's foot scraped over the plate. Back shot the ball to third, a trifling wink too late to catch the man making for that base. And over on second the player who had hit to Carver came into the sack standing up. The field was in an uproar.

Something was the matter with the Baldwin captain's throwing arm!

Southpaw Baker, unnerved by the play, obligingly issued a pass. Bases full!

"Hit to center!" cried a Preston City fan, wildly.

The home team's back was to the wall. Battling against a 4 to 1 lead in the last of the seventh, it was necessary to make every break count. And discovery that the Baldwin fielder's great throwing arm was gone brought new hope. Why, the smallest kind of a single

to center would likely score two men! But the next batter popped out on a fly to the first baseman. Two down and the bases crowded.

Bingo!

First ball pitched and a drive rightly placed . . . singing straight over the second sack, striking the green and coming to the center fielder on the second bound. Runners streaking around the bases. Again the rather pathetic spectacle of the fielder racing in with the ball . . . and the second baseman rushing out to relay it in . . . the shortstop dashing over to cover the bag.

Two runs in. A man on first and third. Three runs all told. Two out.

Over in right field the fellow who had wanted to be captain crouched, chewing nervously at a blade of grass. His eyes were on the diamond, but they were unseeing. Instead, Wally was calling to mind the vision of two team-mates—fighting. He saw a fist flash out and the form of one of the team-mates stagger and go down. He saw the fellow hit throw out his right arm in an effort to break the fall

. . . and then an expression of pain as the arm crumpled under him.

"Gee!"

Realization swept over Wally in that instant. Eagle had hurt himself that night and had said nothing to anyone about it. But now he had been forced to reveal the fact. Now—when another hit to center might mean the game!

A sudden overwhelming sense of shame and remorse swept over Wally. It wasn't so hard to understand now why Eagle had been chosen captain over him. What a cad he had been! How stubbornly and willfully and, yes—traitorously blind! Refusing to admit himself to have been in the wrong. Trying every way he knew to discredit Eagle Carver. Endeavoring to force his team-mates to accept him for something he was not! Jeopardizing even the winning of games in the hope of attaining his ends. And here Eagle had had to let him work out his spite before he could or would get wise to himself!

In that moment of realization Wally's ponderous mushroom of resentment was punc-

tured, collapsing about him like the folds of a riddled balloon. And through the clearing maze of his past actions, Wally saw himself, for the first time, exactly as others had come to see him. The sight was anything but cheering.

"I can't understand how I could ever have gotten this way," moaned Wally. "That's not the fellow I really am! If it is . . .!"

Baldwin's right fielder bit his lips until the color left them. His attention came back to the game in a flash. He was ready to take his medicine now. Ready to accept any penalty which team-mates or coach might deal out. But the thing he didn't want was for anything he had done to hurt the team's chances of winning. An inning ago he'd been exulting because his triple and double had driven in Baldwin's four runs. He'd been obsessed with the one desire to show his team-mates up. But now . . . *now* he was obsessed with a desire of much greater intensity . . . a burning desire to show his team-mates a side of him that had long been submerged.

"If Eagle's bum arm loses for us, I'm to

blame!" moaned Wally. "Come on, Southy! We're with you, big boy! Get this next batter!"

Southpaw Baker, as if in answer to the entreaty, pulled himself together and pitched himself out of a bad hole by fanning the Preston City hitter, ending the inning.

"Whew!" breathed the fellow who had wanted to be captain, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

Score—Baldwin, 4; Preston City, 3.

On the bench Coach Jedele took Captain Carver aside and had a talk with him. He examined the player's throwing arm and called for tape, bandaging the wrist.

"How'd you do it?" asked Matt Scudder, as team-mates crowded around, anxiously.

"Slipped and fell the other night, going home," came the ready answer.

"Liar!" muttered Wally under his breath. "You sweet liar!"

But there was nothing he could do. Nothing that anyone could do except to hope for the best. Baldwin had pulled through a bad in-

ning. Chances were, Southpaw Baker would be master of the situation the rest of the way. He hadn't really weakened. Preston City had just run into a succession of fortunate circumstances. Coach Jedele did not consider it wise to send in substitute Reynolds for his star center fielder. Eagle was the greatest ground-covering fielder he had. The Baldwin captain was noted for pulling down drives which other fielders would let go for hits. It was a tribute to Eagle then that, even with a sprained wrist, he was sent back into the game in the last of the eighth!

Wally edged over to the fellow who had been elected captain, as Preston City came in for bats, the score still standing the same.

"I—I'm sorry," he said.

But the Baldwin center fielder continued on his way out to position, unanswering.

The last of the eighth passed quickly, much to Wally's relief. Preston City went out—one, two, three—Southpaw Baker bearing down in splendid style. Baldwin fans breathed easier. The championship was in their team's

hands if the slender lead could be held an inning longer.

Wally was the third man up for his side in the first of the ninth. If he could only do something more . . . something to make Baldwin's hope of victory more secure! It wasn't enough that he had already been responsible for the scoring of all Baldwin's runs. He had practically counteracted this by his other actions which had caused Eagle's injury and handed Preston City their only runs! If it hadn't been for him, Southpaw Baker would still, in all likelihood, have had Preston City shut out! Ironical, wasn't it, that he had been largely instrumental in scoring all the runs on both sides!

"I've got to make it up somehow!" Wally kept repeating to himself as he stepped into the batter's box. "I've got to!"

His home run clout which followed was adjudged the longest hit ever made on Preston City's diamond.

"Good boy, Wally!" congratulated Coach Jedele as Baldwin's batting star, again on his

throne, jogged in to the bench, face flushed at the ovation being given him. "You're sure hitting today. That little smack hands us the game on a platter."

"I hope so," said the fellow who had wanted to be captain, and sat down, stealing a glance at the fellow with the bandaged wrist.

"All right, team—everything you've got!" cried the coach a moment later. "Only three more!"

Baldwin took the field with heightened spirits and great determination. A 5 to 3 lead in the last of the ninth was something to feel good over . . . something to hang onto. Especially when the opposing team was the mighty Preston City—a Preston City not quite so mighty today—thanks to Southpaw Baker and Wally Coburn!

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND-HANDED PEG

It is an old bromide that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and Preston City, grasping at straws, took the last turn at bat with a determination equal to Baldwin's.

The first batter hit deep to short and by great running managed to beat Matt Scudder's throw to first by an eyelash.

"Never mind that!" shouted Coach Jedele. "Go get 'em, team!"

Southpaw Baker stepped from the pitcher's box and dusted his fingers in the dirt.

"Take your time!" encouraged the infield.

"I'm sorry, old man," apologized Matt Scudder, coming in. "I ought to had him."

"It's all right," grinned Southy. "You can't get 'em all, Matt."

The Baldwin shortstop returned to his position and Southpaw Baker to the mound. Slowly Baker worked over two strikes on the

man at the plate. This was the batter he wanted. Still three to get. A foul into the stands. Another foul. The fellow was dying hard. And Preston City rooters were cheering frenziedly.

"We're going to score! We're going to score! We're going to score!" they chanted.

Perhaps the strident confidence of the home crowd got under Southpaw Baker's hide. At any rate he suffered a momentary lapse of control and the count soon changed to two and three on the batter. The next ball had to be over.

"Don't lose him in there!" called Captain Carver from the outfield. "Let us have him, big boy!"

Either Southy took Eagle at his word or couldn't help himself, for, on the next pitch, there was the crack of wood against leather and the white streak of a ball as it hopped over the third base bag into left field. Fast fielding by Al Tyson, in left, held the hit to two bases and kept the runner already on the paths from going beyond third. But Preston City was now delirious with joy and Baldwin was

distinctly up in the air. The entire complexion of the game was changed. A single would probably tie the score. And after that . . .?

The next batter bunted. A simple little squeeze play but it worked to perfection. Baker, excited, rushed in to take the bunt . . . fumbled . . . recovered . . . and threw to the plate in an attempt to get the runner there. He might better have cut the batsman down at first. As it was, the batter continued madly on for second and slid in under catcher Harve Cody's throw while the runner rounding third threatened to go on home. A terrific din was raging. Preston City had executed some smart baseball and was now strongly intrenched for the winning punch.

Men on second and third and no one out. Score—Baldwin, 5; Preston City, 4. Another hit would tie the game at least. And—Preston City's heaviest batter was up!

Home Run Conklin, the batter Coach Jedele had mimicked for his players in practice, took his position at the plate, eyes gleaming at the opportunity which was his. Southpaw Baker

had made him look extremely foolish in his previous trips to bat.

"Back!" cautioned Eagle, in center, motioning to the fielders on his left and right.

"That's right!" shrieked a Preston City fan. "Back against the fence . . . and that won't be far enough! Here goes your old ball game!"

It was a moment to try the fighting heart of the most veteran of nines. Quizzically, members of Baldwin High's team remembered Coach Jedele's gesture and the hit he had walloped over the fence with his fungo stick. Home Run Conklin's big siege gun had been silenced thus far this game. And its very silence had made the black bat he now rested on his broad shoulders seem the more ominous. This was a situation that the Wally Coburn who had been would have relished. It was a situation which either made a batter a dub or a hero. And to players with the confidence of a Conklin or a Coburn, the chances of their coming through were more with them than against them. Reputation, traveling ahead of them, had a demoralizing effect upon the

enemy in such critical instances as this.

"He's done it before and he's liable to do it again!" was the thought that seemed to hover in the air like the murky atmosphere before a violent blow.

Conklin laughed as he saw the Baldwin fielders moving back toward the fence. On the bases two Preston City runners crouched forward, ready for the dash home. There was little question but that Conklin would hit. A fly to the outfield would sacrifice a man in and tie the score. Southpaw Baker was tottering. Eagle Carver's inability to use his throwing arm several innings before had put his team in the hole . . . and Preston City's knowledge of this inability was lending added force to the rally now.

"Hit to center!" came the cry again. "That's all you've got to do, Conky! Hit to center!"

Home Run Conklin nodded and flashed his black-handled bat. He knew what to do and he was going to do it.

Southpaw Baker looked out hopefully over the outfield. His glance seemed to say, "I'm

depending on you guys out there! Get under this drive if this baby hits or the game's over!"

Then Southy turned and pitched.

"Ball one!"

Out in right field, Wally Coburn was chewing on a blade of grass again . . . and muttering.

"Ball two!"

A roar from the Preston City crowd.

"He's going to walk him!"

But Baker had no such intentions. He hooked a curve in for the first strike. Home Run Conklin looked his surprise and took a new grip on his bat.

Then it happened. The ball had no sooner left the bat than everyone in the crowd knew it was all over. Out in right and center fields two players ran with their backs to the diamond, giving occasional glances back over their shoulders and then redoubling their speed. Home Run Conklin rounded first as runners from second and third pounded homeward.

A startled cry from the crowd . . . a cry of sheer amazement . . . almost unbelief . . . brought the runners up in their

tracks. Out near the fence, as it seemed the ball was to disappear, the form of the Baldwin center fielder leaped frantically into the air. A gloved hand reached up and up and somehow managed to connect with the streak of white, swallowing it from sight. Then the fielder fell heavily to earth, taking care, however, to hold the gloved hand aloft.

What a miraculous catch! Home Run Conklin stopped on his way to second and stared, dumbfounded. Coachers at third and first entreated the other runners to hasten back to second and third respectively and touch their bags, so that they could advance a base. The Baldwin center fielder was on his feet now but he was out near the fence . . . so far out that there was no chance of his throwing the ball in. He was starting to run in with it, but the Baldwin shortstop and second baseman had been so stunned at the turn events had taken that they had made no move to assist.

Touching third the runner dug out again for home and the tying score. He did not even glance toward the field, so certain was he of counting.

Someone has written that there is many a

slip twixt the cup and the lip, and someone equally brilliant has declared that it is unwise to depend on eggs until they are hatched. Each of these epigrams might have applied here.

Cutting across the grass in the outfield, chest heaving, arms outstretched, came the lunging form of Baldwin's star right fielder. As he neared the running figure of his team captain he cried, "The ball! The ball! Give it to me!"

And the fellow with the bandaged wrist, hearing, tossed the ball in underhanded fashion.

It was a long throw-in and the main thing was to get the ball back to the diamond. But Wally Coburn had never been noted for his accuracy in pegging.

"Home!" screamed Eagle. "Throw it home!"

And Wally set himself for the effort. As he drew back his arm he saw the runner leaving third. The ball left his hand on a skimming line, with every ounce of his strength behind it. Tensely the two fielders watched the race between runner and ball. Ten feet from the

plate, they saw the runner look up, astounded, and leap forward as catcher Harve Cody reached out his mitt and took a white object which came to him on the first bound—a perfect peg!

The umpire's hand waved.

"You're out!"

But the catcher did not stop with tagging the man who slid into him. He shot the ball on a scorching flash to third base just as another runner hit the dirt in a slide. Dolf Stoner speared the ball with his gloved hand and pressed it against a leg as it hooked out for the bag.

"Side retired!" bellowed the umpire, though not a soul heard him.

Up in the stands behind the home plate, during the tremendous uproar which followed, the official scorer turned perplexedly to Knox, the news reporter, and asked, "Say, how would you score such a play, anyhow?"

Knox rubbed a finger alongside his nose, meditatively.

"Put it down as a second-handed peg," he said.

But there was nothing second-handed in the manner that the respective custodians of Baldwin High's center and right field positions came to grips after the play which saved the game and won for their school its first championship. What did it matter who was captain or who was the better player? The thing they had wanted most had come to pass, and each of them had done his best to bring it about.

"Eagle, you're the whitest guy I ever knew!" shouted Wally, above the din. "I can't ever make up to you for what you've done for me . . . and the rotten way I've treated you . . ."

"Forget it," laughed Eagle. "Doesn't everything work out for the best? I couldn't ever have made a peg like that from out here . . . and you couldn't have, either, if things hadn't been—well, just as they were!"

Joy-crazed Baldwinites swarmed on the field and grabbed up Wally and Eagle, carrying them apart. But there was everywhere evidence for Wally that fellow team-mates had taken him back among them. Why, here was his old friend, Harve Cody, grinning from ear

to ear . . . and there was Squint Pickens, lame-footed mascot, both fighting to get to him.

"Can't make it!" yelled Harve, after a struggle. "Oh, well! See you in the club-house!"

And Squint, also unable to reach Baldwin's outstanding hero, cried: "Man, what a throw! You pitched a strike, Wally—a strike from the outfield!"

The delirium lasted for half an hour before the fellow who had been elected captain and the fellow who had wanted to be captain could escape from Baldwin's celebrating thousands. Released at last after a ride twice around the bases on jostling shoulders, the two fielders made a dash for the locker room in Preston City's field house, which had been assigned to their team. But, upon entering, they discovered that they had only leaped from the frying pan to land in the fire, for team-mates seized upon them to administer a joyous pommeling until both good-naturedly begged for mercy.

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER CAPTAIN IS CHOSEN

"Don't anyone leave the locker room," commanded Harve Cody, amid the excitement over Baldwin's victory. "Remember, we've got an important piece of business to attend to."

"Oh, yes!" recalled Matt Scudder. "This is the time we elect next year's captain, isn't it? I'd almost forgotten."

"We'll have to make it snappy," cautioned Lou Perry. "Train leaves inside an hour."

"We should worry," kidded Dolf Stoner. "If we miss the train there'll probably be enough dark horses in the race for us to ride home on!"

"Ow! The spanking machine for that guy!"

"Under a cold shower!"

"One at a time, gentlemen!" grinned Dolf, backing off. "I want to enjoy these pleasant little tokens of your appreciation single-handed!"

Chic Redman, behind, snapped the merry-maker with the wet end of a towel. Dolf reversed his direction with a yelp and leaped forward.

"I surrender!" he cried, as hands laid hold to transport him to a shower. "You don't have to ride me. I'm not a dark horse! I'm not out for captain! I won't even vote if you say so!"

"All right, then. See that you stay put!" warned Al Tyson. "The idea of your wise-cracking this way when we're all so down-hearted over our defeat . . ."

"Our *defeat?*"

"Of Preston City!" added Al, grinning.

"Hey, that's a worse crack than I made!" objected Dolf. "What you going to do to him?"

"Give him a medal," proposed Eagle. "I didn't think anybody could make a worse crack than you!"

"See here, guys! All joshing aside!" insisted Lou Perry. "Eagle's captaincy is up after this game and it's high time we are electing one of us to fill his shoes!"

"Has anyone got feet big enough?" inquired a voice.

"Who said that?"

No answer. The fellows looked at one another, roguishly. Imagine their settling down to anything serious after the greatest Baldwin triumph in years!

"Let somebody appoint himself captain," suggested Southy Baker. "Why bother us with an election?"

"Huh!" snorted Matt. "I'd like to see a guy in this bunch with nerve enough to appoint himself. He'd only be starting a revolution."

Wally, sitting quietly in a corner of the locker room, hoped that he, for the moment, had been forgotten. He was almost overwhelmingly happy that things had turned out as they had. If his selfish, miserable attitude had resulted in the team's losing to Preston City he could never have forgiven himself. And now that he was again in the favor of his fellows, Wally desired nothing so much as to accept this favor humbly and gratefully. He did not yet feel anywhere near deserving. But, oh, it *did* feel good to know that the

contemptible person who had been masquerading as Wally Coburn had been completely routed!

"I don't see now how I could ever have gotten that way," said Baldwin's star batter to himself, remorsefully. "It would have served me right if I'd been banned from the team. Coach Jedele must have been wise to me and yet he didn't say a word about the—the real trouble! He's a prince, too!"

Team-mates, getting dressed first, sat about on benches, waiting for slower members.

"Hurry it up, you birds!" called Matt. "Lou's walking holes in this concrete floor, he's so crazy for you to hold that election and vote him captain."

"You're full of Irish potatoes!"

"Not yet, but soon!" promised Matt, dodging a glove. "That's what I'm going to have for supper. Better pick that glove up, Lou. If Chic finds out he'll crown you!"

"Let him try it!" challenged Baldwin's snappy second baseman. "I could eat two *chicks* the way I feel at present!"

"Whew! These puns are getting fierce!"

sniffed Al. "The air's getting bad in here. A few more and we'll all have to beat it!"

Southy Baker, last player dressed, closed his grip.

"All right, boys! Now let the election begin! I'm ready!"

"It's about time!" reprimanded Lou. "Everybody all set? . . . Who do you want for chairman?"

"Makes no diff!"

"How about you?"

Baldwin's second baseman raised a restraining hand.

"Fellows, I propose Squint Pickens! If our mascot can't vote, he ought to be put to some good use!"

"Yea!"

"Can you put a motion, Squint?"

Baldwin's lame-footed mascot beamed.

"Sure!"

"Fine! He deserves the honor of being chairman, gang! He told me he sat there on the bench with his fingers crossed on Conklin's drive. No telling, this little stunt may have won us the game!"

"Yea!" laughed the team. "Squint for chairman!"

And, before he could help himself, Squint was seized, slapped into a chair, passed along shoulder high and placed on top of two benches, from which altitude he looked down upon a group of fellows he idolized.

"Gee!" said Squint, grinning a bit self-consciously, "I'm some guy, ain't I?"

"You are while your power lasts," informed Lou. "All right, Squint. Call this bunch of hoodlums to order and let's get some action!"

"Order!" commanded Squint, and, astonishing enough, there *was* order! Squint looked about him, exultantly, enjoying to the fullest the part he was being permitted to play in the team's election. "You fellows all know what we're gathered together to do," he said finally, when it became apparent to him that he was supposed to say something, "so you fellows get busy and do it!"

Amid laughter, Harve Cody addressed the chair.

"Mr. Chairman, am I to infer by your re-

mark that the nominations for captain are open?"

"They're nothing but!"

"Then may I put in nomination the name of Wally Coburn?"

"You sure can!"

"Yea!"

"Mr. Chairman!" It was the retiring captain, Eagle Carver, speaking.

"Mr. Chairman!" The fellow who had wanted to be captain over Eagle was also on his feet. "Mr. Chairman!"

"Mr. Carver has the floor!" announced Squint, quite properly.

"Atta boy, Squint! You know your Robert's rules of order!"

Wally, remaining standing, heard the fellow he had bitterly opposed second the nomination of his name for captain. Eagle was supporting him as his successor to the captaincy.

"Mr. Chairman," insisted Wally, determinedly.

"Mr. Coburn," recognized Squint.

"I'd like to ask Harve Cody to withdraw his nomination of me," pleaded Wally. "And also

for Eagle to withdraw his second. I—I'm not fit to be captain to begin with . . . and, besides, I . . . I don't want to be captain!"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Lou. "He sounds like Eagle did last year! Sit down, Wally, and save your breath!"

Baldwin's star right fielder, face flustered, held out his arms, appealingly.

"Please, fellows, don't rub it in! And that's all you'd be doing, putting my name up for captain . . . after all the rotten things I've pulled this season. I know Harve means well . . . and it's mighty sporting of Eagle. But wanting to be captain got me into all this mess. I was so bigheaded I couldn't see anything else besides myself. I never thought I could be so small. The feelings just sort of grew on me until it didn't seem, somehow, as though I could control 'em. And putting me up for captain, well—I couldn't go through with it, gang."

"What's the idea of all this?" broke in Chic Redman, with an attempt at airiness. "You're not elected yet!"

"Yes, he is!" declared Squint, with involuntary loyalty. "I declare the nominations closed!"

"Hey, you can't do that!"

"Who's going to stop me?" defied Squint.

"I'll help you," volunteered Matt. "I'll make your declaration in the form of a motion!"

"I second it!" put in Al.

"All those in favor?" called Squint.

"AYE!"

Baldwin's mascot glowed his pleasure. He looked down upon the fellow he had formerly hero-worshiped and whom he now hero-worshiped again, with a mischievous expression which as much as said: "Remember when you had me sound out the fellows as to how you stood with them for captain? Well, you didn't rate so good then. But, boy, see how you rate now! And, say, maybe I didn't put you across slick!"

But, now that the railroading had come his way, Wally was sincerely, even distressedly, not desirous of it. He felt the keen humiliation of his selection, in the light of his past conduct.

And he did not mean to accept this ordinarily coveted honor, despite its unanimous conferment upon him.

"Fellows, I thank you more than I can say," he faltered. "It helps to know you're not holding anything against me. This thing of being captain, heading the team for next year . . . that's something else, again. I forfeited what little claim I might have had to such an honor. So if you'll just reconsider the whole matter, you can count on me giving all I've got under whomever you pick for captain. I've got a lot to make up and all I'm asking is the chance to do it!"

"Listen, Wally!" broke in Lou. "What you did in today's game has made up plenty! It's not how you were, that counts with us; it's how you are right now! And we're not electing you because we want to make you feel good. We're electing you because we want you!"

"Yea!"

Wally smiled faintly at this. They weren't electing him because "they wanted to make him *feel good.*" No, it was quite evident they

weren't considering his personal feelings or wishes at all.

"It's no use, bunch," repeated Wally, firmly. "I can't accept."

"You've got to!" decreed Squint Pickens, from his lofty seat. "I'm the chairman and what I say goes! This meeting hasn't been adjourned yet!"

"That's right," laughed Eagle. "Mr. Chairman, may I have a word?"

"All the words you want," promised Squint. "Quiet everybody or I'll have you thrown out!"

"What a hard-boiled bird *he* is!" exclaimed Lou. "And here I proposed him for chairman! Well, that just goes to show you never can tell."

"Mr. Chairman!" insisted Eagle, "do I have it quiet or not?"

"So you can hear a pin drop!" assured Squint.

"He means a bowling pin!" contributed Matt.

"Listen, you guys," pleaded the chairman. "We know you're all funny, but Mr. Carver's

got something important to say . . ."

"How do you know?"

"By the way he looks!"

Eagle stepped into the center of the circle, facing Wally.

"You tell us you can't take the captaincy," he started. "But I'm telling you, Wally, that you can't turn us down . . . not if you're sincere in saying you'd give us everything you have next year . . ."

"But wait a minute, Eagle! You don't understand," broke in the fellow who now didn't want to be captain.

"Yes I *do* understand!" insisted Eagle. "And that's why I'm speaking my piece. I know exactly how you feel. Didn't I try to dodge the captaincy myself last year? Of course my reasons weren't the same as yours are now. But a fellow shouldn't let anything personal stand in the way . . . and that's what you're doing!"

"Well, I . . . just what do you mean?"

"Last year you'd have taken the captaincy without a quibble if you'd been elected, wouldn't you?" fired Eagle, frankly.

Wally hesitated, face flushing slightly.

"Y-e-s, I suppose I would," he admitted, slowly.

"Now, if you don't take it," pointed out Eagle, "you're laying yourself open to some of the guys thinking you don't want the captaincy at all if you couldn't have had it when you were out after it!"

"That's not so!" denied Wally, quickly.

"I don't believe it is. I believe you're all over any feeling, as we certainly are. But you're still somewhat sensitive about the past, which you shouldn't be, because that's all over. We're all for you, Wally—and we know, with you feeling the way you do now, that you'll make just the kind of leader we'll need to take us through next season. We'll have practically an all-veteran team to take one last crack at Preston City before most of us leave school. You're the one who wants to reconsider, Wally—not us. We've made our selection and we're standing pat. If you turn us down on this you're hurting us, in another way, almost as much!"

A strained moment followed, in which Wally

looked uncertainly from one to another of his team-mates.

"Eagle's right," confirmed Lou, earnestly.

"We're banking on you," added Harve, putting a hand on Wally's arm. "You can't fail us, old pal."

Wally's eyes went suddenly moist. He couldn't actually deserve this confidence which was being placed in him. The thing that hurt was the sensing that he was getting back much better than he had given out. The fellows were putting him on his mettle. They had voted for the Wally Coburn they had known before the worms of jealousy and bigheadedness had eaten into him. He was being accepted largely on faith, for they had seen the old Wally Coburn for the first time in weeks today. Captain! How he had dreamed of this honor! How he had selfishly desired it! And now that it was within his reach, he could not feel elated. He could only feel humbly appreciative.

"Fellows," said Wally, brokenly, "you know I don't want to go back on you. But, somehow, I didn't feel as though I could make you the right sort of captain. Not after

. . . but, then, you say to forget the past. All right! Just the same, I can't help telling you this. It's just that . . . that I used to think a fellow was picked for captain because he was considered the best player. Now I know different. I've gotten all over this big-cheese stuff. Now I know that a fellow is picked . . . well, for what he is as a fellow. And that's why I . . . gee, bunch, all I can say is, I hope I can prove to be the sort of fellow you give me credit for being by electing me!"

"We're not worrying about that!" reassured Matt, warmly.

"No, I should say not!" cried Southy Baker.

"Cut the long face!" commanded Lou Perry, trying to save Wally's feelings. "What you think we elected you to—undertaker? And you still haven't said, out and out, are you going to take the job or aren't you?"

Wally grinned, a flash of his old joviality returning.

"For better or for worse," he rejoined.

And then the meeting broke up without the formality of adjournment, despite the mad

clamoring of Chairman Squint Pickens for order. And the first fellow to shake the hand of the captain-elect was the fellow he had so bitterly opposed. Then followed in rapid succession the other members of the team, led by Harve Cody.

"For he's a jolly good fellow!" started Dolf Stoner, who laid claim to being the only real singer on the team.

It was here that Coach Jedele dashed in.

"Hey, what's the matter with you guys?" he shouted. "Bus is waiting outside. Only ten minutes to make the train!"

"Great grief!" exploded Lou Perry. "We forgot all about it!"

"And the home folks are probably waiting to set fire to the railroad station as soon as we pull in!" joshed Chic. "Come on, guys, it wouldn't be *fare* to miss that! Ouch! Who kicked me?"

CHAPTER X

A NEW TEAM SHOWS PROMISE

THE seasons have a way of rolling around, methodically and with a swiftness which is breath-taking when folks suddenly realize that spring has come again, it scarcely having seemed as though the previous spring had been put more than a few months behind.

This quite aptly expressed the feelings which candidates for Baldwin High's new baseball team experienced as they gathered in the school gymnasium for the first practice session.

"Where the Sam Hill did summer, fall and winter go to?" demanded Harve Cody. "What's the matter with me, guys? Am I growing old? They say the older a fellow gets the faster time flies! You don't see any white hairs on my topknot, do you?"

"Well, you're almost veteran enough of the grand baseball armies of Baldwin to be sprouting a few," paraphrased Eagle.

"Same to you!" retorted Harve. "And many of them!"

"Wally's the boy who's going to begin cultivating white hairs!" declared Lou. "For his captain's duties will be starting in earnest, pretty soon! Remember, last year, how round-shouldered Eagle got from carrying the team's burdens?"

"You're full of snake oil!" denied Eagle, laughing.

"Let the burdens come!" accepted Wally. "I've had a good lay-off and I'm ready to put on the old harness. Let's see—who's missing this season?"

"Al Tyson and Dolf Stoner," supplied Squint.

"Well, hello, Mascot!" recognized Wally. "Can't we ever get rid of you?"

"Yep," answered Squint. "This is my last year. I'm graduating . . . into high school! Next year I'm going to go out for cheer leader!"

"Bully for you!" supported Lou. "Always does my heart good to see a young feller step out and get an advancement! Of course I don't

know what next year's team's going to do without you, but I don't give a hang because I won't be here myself . . . unless, heaven forbid, I should fail in Spanish! You know I thought that language would be a cinch for me because I liked Spanish onions so much . . . but, gee whiz!"

"And you found the language even stronger than the onions, eh?" kidded Chic. "I sure sympathize with you, Señor!"

"Cut the monkey-doodling!" commanded Captain Coburn. "Coach'll be here in a minute and I want to see how we stack up as to material. With Al and Dolf gone this year, it means we're in particular need of a left fielder and a third baseman. Right?"

"Since when do you vets figure you're going to be able to hold your positions?" razzed Wayne Craig, a new candidate. "What you doing? Throwing out the hint that we other birds had better either try out for left field or third base? You go sit on a nice sharp tack!"

The crowd of forty-odd candidates was in excellent humor.

"That's the spirit!" commended Eagle. "Look out, Wally, you'll have to be more diplomatic than that or you'll have a hard time leading this gang. I can see right now that they're going to be an unruly lot. Glad I was captain *last* year!"

Baldwin's star batter, under his first fire, weathered the good-natured attack with a quick comeback.

"I want to make the new candidates good and mad," explained Wally, "so they'll go out and make us veterans work, and if any of 'em beat us out, hats off to 'em!"

"Yea!"

Coach Jedele's entrance silenced the free-for-all bantering of the crowd, all of whom gave him their close and enthusiastic attention.

"Here we are again—fresh, wide-awake, ready for another season," greeted the coach. "With enough men of experience back, supported by a promising group of subs to give us, on paper at least, as strong if not the strongest nine Baldwin High has had since I've been in charge."

"That's what we want!" cried a voice.

"Naturally," cautioned the former big league star, who now owned a sporting goods store in Baldwin and coached the school team as a hobby. "Good material doesn't mean a good nine until that material has been whipped in shape. But with you fellows following training regulations and giving your best on the diamond, there's no reason why we shouldn't develop a team that'll make the outfits on our schedule sit up and take notice!"

With this, Coach Jedele ordered the candidates to loosen up arms by pairing off and tossing the ball back and forth.

"By the end of the week groundkeeper Nolan says he'll have our diamond in shape," he informed them. "And then the real workouts will commence. We've got to get going early this season because our schedule calls for three more games than last and all of 'em look like they're going to be tough!"

To one player, the months between the day of the game with Preston City and the present moment had dragged with inexpressible slowness. Again and again this player had dreamed

of what he hoped to do when the new season should arrive. He still felt that there was much which called for redeeming. And, as this was his Senior year, it presented his last opportunity to make such a showing as would blot out any memories of conduct for which he was heartily ashamed.

"I'd like to set the pace for all-around playing," Wally told himself. "Not to top the other fellows but as my way of expressing appreciation for their faith in me."

Captain Coburn made an auspicious beginning in line with his resolution in the opening game of the season against Bingham. A marked man because of his home run clout in the ninth inning of last year's game which had scored two men ahead of him and won for Baldwin, 6 to 5, Wally, nevertheless, went on another batting rampage. Two triples, two doubles and a single in five times at bat gave him a perfect average for the day and accounted for ten of the sixteen run total which Baldwin's veteran aggregation amassed. Poor Bingham! Minus pitcher Torrence, who had

proved such an enigma to Baldwin for eight innings the previous year, the little school presented sorry opposition.

"You can't beat Baldwin anyhow," lamented a Bingham fan. "All their players wear good luck charms around their necks, carry rabbits' feet in their hip pockets and toss horseshoes at one another in practice!"

Which came as near to being a compliment as Baldwin ever received from her red-hot Bingham rivals.

"Too bad Bingham doesn't have as much good material as it has fighting spirit," said Coach Jedele after the game, in which Southy Baker had twirled with mid-season form, allowing the visitors only five hits and one run. "For a pint-sized, crossroads school, they usually manage to give us as much as we can handle in an early season game!"

But Coach Jedele, in speaking a good word for Baldwin's first opponent, was keeping one eye shut. Facts of the matter were, the Bingham team this season was practically as strong as last, the difference in score only serving to indicate Baldwin's greatly increased power.

And this greatly increased power, Coach Jedele knew, was due to one thing only—a total lack of jealousy or feeling between team members. Every fellow was pulling for the others. A spirit of comradeship prevailed which had not existed at any time last season. And this spirit had made itself immediately evident in a better playing morale.

"Captain Wally Coburn in Great Batting Form," the *Baldwin Tribune* proclaimed. "Leads His Team in Merciless Assault upon Plucky Bingham Nine. Great Year Foreseen in Performance of Baldwin High Aggregation."

A great year!

Murder on the high seas and also on baseball diamonds!

Southpaw Baker was going to be able to breeze through, saving his pitching arm for the tougher contests, this season. His team-mates were out to knock the horsehide off the ball in every game. Amboy, next opponent, helped Baldwin stage another "slaughter of the innocents" by succumbing to the overwhelming tune of 18 to 3.

"Three touchdowns against one field goal," tallied Harve Cody, humorously, after the swat-fest, in which Wally had collected two home runs, two three-base hits and three walks in seven times up. The official scorer, however, credited him with only four times at bat and four hits to keep his phenomenal hitting streak intact.

"Captain Coburn Still Batting 1,000!" read the headlines this time. "Team-mates Evidently Trying to Keep Pace. Eagle Carver Runner-Up in Today's Game with Three Two-Baggers and Homer."

All of which accounted quite readily for a sudden, riotous interest in the home team displayed by Baldwin citizens. Preston City had been noted as a slugging outfit last season, but Baldwin's mighty rivals, in their most hectic heyday, could hardly lay claim to any more tremendous clouting than Baldwin had revealed. The whole team seemed infected with a rash of *swatitis,* even Southy Baker breaking in the hit column with a pair of singles when all he was supposed to do was to keep the opposing team from hitting!

"What did I tell you?" reminded Eagle, happily, as he, Harve and Wally were homeward bound, one evening after practice. "You were just the tonic the bunch needed, Wally. Your playing is putting the drive in the team. We've got about the same gang on the field with the exception of Wilbur at third and Craig in left, but everybody's producing like a house afire!"

"I'll tell the world, they are!" echoed Harve, slapping a pleased Baldwin captain on the back, "And say, Wally, do you realize you're darn close to a consecutive hitting record for an individual in high school?"

Wally shook his head.

"I'm not thinking about that," he answered, truthfully. "If the team's winning, that's all that interests me."

"Yeah, but it won't do any harm to take a try for the record," argued Eagle. "Especially when you're so close. Let's see—you're credited with nine straight hits in nine official trips to the plate. If I've got the right dope, two more hits does the business!"

Wally shrugged his shoulders.

"Last year that might have interested me,"

he confessed, "but not now. Of course I'll be trying every time I'm at bat. And if I should happen to keep up my hitting, well—fine."

Harve and Eagle exchanged sly, admiring glances.

"Boy, I guess there's not even a swelled hair left," decided Harve, finally. "Just the same, Wally, we're all pulling for you."

"Thanks," said the team's star batter. "That's what helps more than anything else."

CHAPTER XI

WALLY NEARS A RECORD

An extra large crowd was on hand to witness the next game, against Hamilton, chiefly because of published reports that Captain Coburn of the home team was within batting reach of a record. Always popular, due to his heavy hitting ability, Wally had become the king, mayor and ruler of all he surveyed on the basis of this season's marvelous performance. His drawing power was equivalent to that of an amateur Babe Ruth. The very sight of him on the field excited a murmur of comment and applause. And yet Wally remained impervious to it all, seriously intent only on his play.

"Holding his head well," approved Coach Jedele, in quiet. "Last year's diet was good for him!"

Southpaw Baker was a bit unsteady to start the opening inning, and Hamilton, on two

scratch hits and a sacrifice, pushed over a run. In Baldwin's half, Chic Redman and Matt Scudder died at first on infield taps. Eagle Carver, however, hit sharply to right and the crowd burst into a roar. Wally Coburn was up!

"Smack it on the nose, Wally!" implored a rabid fan. "Break that old record, boy!"

Apparently unconcerned, Baldwin's star batter did not keep the crowd long in suspense. He swung on the first pitch and the ball streaked through the pitcher's box, on over second base and out to center field. Eagle raced around to third and Wally pulled up at second on the throw-in, with the field a bedlam of sound.

"Did you ever see the beat of that boy's hitting?" shrieked an admirer. "Ten straight hits!"

"All he needs is one more!"

Lou Perry, next at bat, brought groans as he fouled out with a wonderful scoring opportunity before him.

Hamilton, 1; Baldwin, 0, end of first.

But the crowd was obviously not interested

in the score. It had eyes for only one player and, as Wally took the field, he was the recipient of a tremendous bleacher ovation which forced him to doff his cap.

Southy was his old self to start the second inning and Hamilton went out in order. But Herbert, Hamilton twirler, did some hurling on his own account, also retiring the Baldwin side. And when both pitchers duplicated this feat in the third inning, the crowd commenced to sit up and take notice. Perhaps it was in for a pitchers' battle.

In the last of the fourth, with Hamilton still leading, 1 to 0, the crowd began a frenzied stamping. Eagle Carver was first up, and after him, the mighty Wally. Bound to be a thrill this half inning! Would he do it or wouldn't he? The fellow must be laboring under a terrific strain. What must be going on in Wally's mind as he stood out there, swinging his bat, eyes on Eagle in the batter's box?

"Get on, Eagle!" shouted a fan. "Wally'll knock you in!"

A loud, nervous laugh greeted this sally. The laugh was lost in a cheer as Baldwin's

former team captain spanked a drive down the left field foul line for a long single. And now the diamond became a volley of sound as Wally, knocking the dirt from his cleats, stepped toward the plate.

A signal from the bench called him back. Inquiringly he retreated to meet Coach Jedele, who came from the dugout.

"Use your own judgment, Wally. But we want to see you hit it!"

Baldwin's star batter nodded. He turned back toward the plate, body tingling. The sensation he was experiencing was not of excitement, however. He felt strangely apart from all that was happening. The thing that did impress him was how wonderful everyone had been to him. All a fellow had to do was play the game on the square, give the best that was in him, and, somehow, he attracted to himself all manner of good things. Here were the home folks, out in large numbers for the purpose of cheering him on. Wanting to see him excel. Team-mates shouting encouragement from the bench. Coach Jedele giving him a free hand. Eagle grinning best wishes from

the first base sack. Even the Hamilton catcher, putting in a word.

"Good luck, old boy, but not too good!"

Wally's eyes blurred. He rubbed them with the knuckles of his hand. This was apt to be a tight game. Hamilton was dead certain he would try for a hit. Infield playing back on the grass. Wise baseball would call for Eagle's being sacrificed down to second since there were none out. In fact, any other time but this, considering the score, he would draw a reprimand from the coach for doing anything but bunting. But now he could hit, and even if he should hit into a double play he would be excused. Why? Because he was trying for a record! Wally braced himself for the first pitch.

The ball came in, high and wide. Wally let it go.

"Ball one!"

"Oh, wow!" gasped a spectator. "My heart's going a mile a minute!"

Another wide one.

"Ball two!"

"Going to walk him!" howled a fan

"Booooh, Hamilton! Pitch to him! Give him a chance!"

Herbert, pitching to win, cut the corner with a beautiful out drop. Wally let it go by, but nodded approval as the umpire called, "Strike one!"

What should he do? He hadn't swung at the last ball mainly because he was still trying to decide. He probably never would have a chance to break the record again. Chances like this were mostly freaks, anyway. It was seldom that a batter, no matter how good, was fortunate enough to get a string of hits, one after another. Wally studied the infield and outfield carefully.

"Looks like my best chance is to bunt," he figured. "A good one, laid down the third base line, is apt to give me a hit. If it doesn't it'll probably advance Eagle to second, which will still favor me, as it'll be scored as a sacrifice and won't be counted as a time at bat. This would give me another crack at the consecutive hitting record next time up. So I don't see how I can lose much by pulling a bunt and I stand to get away with it!"

Having made up his mind, Wally flashed the

signal to Eagle to go down on the next ball.

Eagle, getting the signal, ran back to the base and squatted on it, shaking his head.

"No!" he wigwagged, thinking that Wally was electing to give up his try for the record.

Wally insisted. Eagle, still disputing the play, was near the sack as Herbert pitched.

The moment the ball left the Hamilton hurler's hand, the crowd sensed a feeling electric.

"This is it!" screamed a high-pitched voice.

Changing his stance as the ball shot toward the plate, Wally bunted down toward third. The bunt, as he had hoped, took the infield completely unaware. Eagle, amazed that Wally should actually have bunted, was a trifle slow in dashing for second. The Hamilton third sacker was playing too far back to get near the ball, but Herbert, charging in, scooped it up.

"Second!" yelled the catcher, his eye on the base runners.

And Herbert, wheeling, threw.

The play was a fielder's choice and the throw

reached the second baseman for a force-out, the ball arriving a step ahead of Eagle. Wally, of course, was safe on first.

For a moment the crowd sat, stunned.

"Why did he do it?" asked a greatly disappointed fan. "Why didn't he hit it out?"

"Wasn't Wally's fault," defended a more discerning rooter. "Nine times out of ten he'd have gotten away with it. Eagle gummed up that play. He was slow as lead getting down to second. That's what cost Wally his record. Otherwise he'd not have been credited with a time at bat or else he'd have made a safe hit; for the way he went down to first I doubt if they could ever have caught him!"

Baldwin's former captain did not have to be told, to realize that he was the one on whom rested the burden for Wally's failure. In leaving the diamond he crossed over to first.

"I'm darn sorry," he apologized. "I didn't want you to blow your chance. That's why I objected to your bunting. And then the pitch came too quick for me to get set . . ."

"I knew what I was doing!" flared Wally, a

wave of bitter disappointment and resentment seizing him. "All you had to do was to follow signals! There was no excuse!"

A hurt look came into Eagle's eyes. He continued on the way to the bench, head downcast. Unkind rooters in the crowd booed him. The hot words Wally had exchanged had given less discerning rooters the hint. It was now apparent to all why Baldwin's star batter had missed out on his record try. A dismal silence fell over the field. Fellow team-mates, feeling the damper of the moment, sat glumly on the bench. Lou Perry, at bat, struck out miserably. Two down. And then Wally, with Wilbur batting, was thrown out on an attempted steal of second, ending the inning.

Dusting himself off, Wally continued on out to his field, picking his glove from the grass as the Hamilton players ran in to the bench to get ready for their half of the fifth. The bleachers greeted him with a rousing cheer in appreciation of his try. Wally shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He had wanted this record much more than he had ever admitted to himself. The realization of just how much

he had wanted it had come upon him now that he had lost out. And especially since his losing out had been through no fault of his own! This was what hurt! The cutting thought of what might have been if . . .! IF! Could Eagle have purposely . . .? Wally checked this idea. No, Eagle had just been dumb, that was all!

"I'll show Eagle just what his dumbness did!" resolved Wally, savagely. "But for him I'd still be set for a record try. Next time up I'm going out after the hit which would have broken the record. If I make it, it won't leave Eagle a leg to stand on!"

The last half of the sixth inning brought Baldwin's star batter to bat again with two out, none on base, and the score still 1 to 0 in favor of Hamilton.

"Get a hit anyhow!" cried a sympathizing fan. "Show us you could have done it!"

And Wally, responding, drove a vicious two base smash to right center. A great groan came from the crowd at the thought of what might have been.

Pulling up on second, hands on hips, Baldwin's star batter could not resist a vindicating

glance in the direction of the dugout where sat a keenly remorseful team-mate. This was rubbing it in. Served Eagle right.

Lou Perry, next up, having failed on two other occasions to hit when hits meant runs, delivered this time on a long single which brought Wally in and tied the score.

On crossing the plate, Wally discovered that he was a greater hero for not having broken the record than he might have been had he succeeded. All because the crowd now believed that he could have set a new record had he not elected to play team work rather than strive for individual honors. And Wally took a measure of grim satisfaction in this.

But the sensational batting rampage of Baldwin's star batter was ended with this two base drive . . . ended, at least, for the day. In the eighth, fellow team-mates finally got to pitcher Herbert and hammered three runs across to clinch the game for a 4 to 2 score.

A proud and happy mascot, acting as the Baldwin captain's bodyguard, escorted Wally across the field and into the clubhouse. Squint swung a bat in front of him to clear the way, threatening, "One strike and you're out!" if

the crowd didn't get back and "give Wally air!"

As they entered the clubhouse, Squint looked up at his idol, exclaiming wistfully, "Gee, Wally, if Eagle had only made second!"

The Baldwin captain's fingers clenched. Yes! He could never forgive Eagle for that! Never! Here was a grudge he couldn't live down. Didn't make any difference if he had told Eagle and Harve he wasn't interested in breaking records. He was only human. Anybody would have tried hard in his place. If he'd failed on his own account it would have been all right. Eagle's apology didn't do any good. He'd done something which could never be made up.

As Wally entered the locker room with Squint he suddenly stopped short at the sound of agitated voices.

"Aw, forget it, Eagle!"

"Don't be so cut up about it. You can't help some things."

"Any of us would have probably pulled the same boner!"

"I don't know about that," replied an inconsolable voice. "I don't blame Wally for be-

ing sore. To think that I was the one who stood in the way of his . . ."

The offending member of the Baldwin team broke off abruptly. From around the corner of the lockers Captain Wally Coburn had appeared. Players in various states of dressing paused in breathless suspense as the two outfielders exchanged glances. The face of Eagle Carver bore a look of inexpressible anguish; that of Wally Coburn, one of hardness which, to the amazement of team-mates, gradually softened into a smile.

Moving slowly across the room, Wally held out his hand. There were unashamed tears in his eyes.

"Eagle," he said, "I know you didn't mean to do it! Everything's all right!"

And as Eagle, his own eyes moist, took the proffered hand in a clasp which brought them closer together than ever before, Wally felt a thrill go through him. In one brief moment of silent combat he had ousted the fellow who had caused so much trouble last season and, in so doing, had taken a big step in proving to his team-mates that he was worthy of the trust they had placed in him.

CHAPTER XII

HIT BY PITCHER

Mid-season found Baldwin High still riding roughshod over opposition, Southpaw Baker hanging up an unbroken string of comparatively easy victories and, as he told the team, "growing fat while doing it." Not the slightest reason to complain at the way the nine was hitting and fielding behind him. But from now on the schedule was entering the supposedly harder half where this same hitting and fielding prowess would be even more appreciated. Captain Wally Coburn's leadership of his team had been most inspiring and was the talk of the town. His phenomenal batting had fallen off considerably, as was to be expected, for no player could hope to sustain the pace with which he had started the season. But, even so, Wally was easily the outstanding hitter on the team and the greatest possible menace in a pinch. He with Eagle Carver, Harve Cody

and Southy Baker were affectionately referred to as "The Four Horsemen of Baldwin High." This quartet was, indeed, the backbone of the best baseball team the school had ever boasted. Eagle's marvelous fielding and wonderful throwing arm had nipped rally after rally of opposing teams either through dazzling catches of drives ticketed for extra bases or pegs from deep center to cut runners down at second, third or home. And Harve, also possessing a great throwing arm, had accounted for his share of would-be base stealers as well as holding Southpaw Baker's curve-ball pitching so skillfully that not a passed ball had been charged against him. Southy himself had but to point to the less than two run average per game scored against him to illustrate how effective had been his contribution to Baldwin's winning cause. As for the other members of a crack nine, it could be said of them that they were every bit as good as they needed to be.

Naturally, with the season passing its halfway mark, the coming battle with Preston City began to bob about in the thoughts of fans, like a cork on the ruffled surface of a lake. In fact

Preston City was the only team which seriously ruffled the surface of Baldwin High's championship hopes. This year Baldwin, because of her last season's triumph, occupied the position of defending title-holder. And Preston City could be counted upon to put forth a tremendous effort to knock the crown from Baldwin's head. Baldwin High had never held the championship two years in succession, had only won it twice in her long history, so here was a glorious opportunity to achieve new laurels, as Preston City was the only state team which could claim such an accomplishment.

The showing of Baldwin's rival had not been so impressive earlier in the season and rooters had boldly asserted that Preston City would be "pie" for Baldwin this year. But, of a sudden, Preston City entered upon winning ways, the main reason being ascribed to the discovery of a pitching phenom in the person of Rex Lathrop, a Senior. Apparently Rex had been hiding his light under a bushel, for he had never considered himself good enough to go out for the team. His chief asset appeared to be a speed ball and, with it under

control, he was mowing down all opposition.

"Don't worry," predicted a wisehead. "By the time Preston City is to stack up against Baldwin, they'll be plenty tough! They're out to keep us from equaling their record by winning the title two years in succession. I look for a mighty tight game!"

The majority of Baldwin rooters, however, could scarcely be blamed for unbounded optimism. Witness the Edgeville game, which newspapers asserted was likely to prove a severe test. In the last of the seventh inning Baldwin was leading by the lopsided score of 11 to 2. Severe test? What a laugh! The Edgeville pitcher had been wild, issuing five bases on balls. Perhaps the advance reputation of Baldwin's heavy hitting batting order had unnerved him. At any rate he had been responsible for a good share of the trouble visited upon him. As a brave gesture he had attempted to pitch to Wally Coburn and had come off decidedly second best, yielding a triple, double and single to the rampaging Baldwin captain.

"Make it a home run this time, Wally!"

called an admirer, as Baldwin's star right fielder stepped to the plate in the last of the seventh with two out and none on base. "Then you'll have one of every kind of hit this game!"

Wally grinned. Would be a novelty if he could do it. Baldwin had the game in the bag and this Edgeville pitcher was serving them up according to his liking.

"Whoa!"

The first pitch was wild, so wild that the Edgeville catcher, leaping high in the air, was just able to knock it down.

"Take your time in there!" called the backstop, in an effort to steady the flustrated hurler. "Pitch to me, big boy. Never mind this egg at the plate!"

The Edgeville pitcher nodded nervously. He wound up slowly, turning on his heel so that he glanced for an instant toward second base, then wheeled and pitched.

"LOOK OUT!"

As the cry arose, Wally Coburn dodged back from the plate, but he was not quite quick enough to get out of the path of the speeding

ball which he had half stepped forward to meet. There was a hollow-sounding crack as the ball caught him over the left temple, flattening him to the ground.

For a moment, Baldwin's star right fielder lay where he had fallen. The Edgeville pitcher came running out of the box toward the hit batsman, crying an apology. Squint Pickens, mascot, followed by team-mates, rushed to Wally's aid as he sat up dazedly, hand to head.

"Awfully sorry, old man," said the pitcher, helping his rival up. "That fast one got away from me. I hope you don't think it was intentional."

"How are you . . . all right?" asked Harve Cody, anxiously.

The Baldwin captain felt of the lump over his temple and took a few tottering steps.

"Yes . . . I guess so . . . just give me . . . a minute."

"Better let someone run for you," suggested Eagle.

"No, I'm all right. I'll run."

Wally trotted down the first base line, hold-

ing his head. The Baldwin rooters gave him a big hand.

The inning, two-thirds gone, was quickly over as Lou Perry, next up, dumped a weak roller down to short and Wally was forced at second.

"How you feeling?" asked Coach Jedele as Wally came in to the bench for his glove.

"Feeling? . . . Oh, pretty good," responded the Baldwin captain, with an attempt at lightness.

The coach examined the lump over the team captain's temple.

"You took quite a rap," he said. "We've got this game sewed. Suppose I send in Reynolds for you. He . . ."

But the appeal in Wally's eyes stopped him.

"All right. Go ahead and finish!"

From his position on the bench, Coach Jedele watched every movement of the Baldwin right fielder. Years in the big leagues had given the coach a shrewd perception—an ability to detect the slightest false action and, with that, the sense of determining pretty well in advance

what might be expected of the individual under observation. Coach Jedele had seen men beaned before. And now he shook his head gravely.

"The kid's bluffing," he told himself.

Edgeville managed to get another run in their half of the eighth, Southy Baker breezing along easily. With what apparently would prove Baldwin's last turn at bat, the home team went out on a hitting orgy to complete the rout, each hitter attempting to save the one following another time up.

So Wally presently found himself at the plate with three runs in, men on second and third, and two out. Coach Jedele had waited hopefully for just such a situation. He leaned forward as Baldwin's star batter entered the batter's box with his customary swagger.

"Atta boy, Wally! Sock her on the nose! A little homer now to get even for his beanin' you!" shouted a Baldwin rooter, encouragingly.

The Baldwin captain choked up on his bat and waved it menacingly toward the pitcher.

The Edgeville slabsman stood fingering the ball, obviously agitated. As he raised his arm to pitch, the batter shifted his feet . . .

The first pitch whizzed past the outside corner of the plate—high and wide. The Edgeville catcher had to jump for it. But high and wide as it was, Wally stepped back from the plate as though to avoid it.

"Just what I thought!" muttered the coach.

"What you 'fraid of?" bellowed a rooter. "He couldn't hit you again if he tried. He's too wild!"

Wally gave a look over his shoulder and smiled . . . a forced smile. The runners on second and third crouched, ready to dash home.

"Bring us in!" cried Eagle, from second. "You're due for another hit, Wally!"

The second pitch was also wide. But this time Baldwin's star batter made the same side-stepping motion and—to everyone's surprise—reached out and swung! He missed, of course . . . missed by six inches . . . and the crowd laughed.

"Wow! Get a windmill!" someone shouted.

"What do you think you're striking at?"

Wally stepped from the batter's box, taking time to tap the dirt from his cleats with the tip end of the bat. The Edgeville pitcher conferred with his catcher, making just as serious a matter of it as though his team still had a chance to win. He resumed his position in the box.

The next pitch was close in and waist high. The batter pulled back from the plate, set himself, and lunged awkwardly at the ball, turning half around.

"Strike two!"

"Come on, Wally, save me a bat," pleaded Lou Perry, eager for another clout at the ball. "Step into 'em!"

The smile was gone from the Baldwin captain's face now. His jaws were set in tight-lined grimness. It was evident that, for some reason, he was having to compel himself to face the pitcher. He left the batter's box again and this time placed his hand to his head as though in pain. The stands let out a perceptible "Ah." So this was what was the matter! Baldwin's most popular player had been hold-

ing up on his nerve. He had been more badly hurt than he had intimated. The sentiment changed.

"Never mind, Wally, old boy, we've got enough!" sang out a sympathizer.

The ball again left the pitcher's hand. This time it was headed straight over the plate. Wally would have to swing at this.

"Here she goes!" chirped a rooter.

The Baldwin captain's bat flashed.

Plunk!

"Yeah . . . right in the catcher's mitt!" rejoined a second rooter, sourly.

The Baldwin players left the bench for the field. Crestfallen, their star batter flung his bat into the air. The ignominy of striking out in such a hitting bee as this had been . . . the Edgeville pitcher's only fanning victim!

Edgeville went out—one, two, three—in their half of the ninth, and the game was history. But something else was not history. It had just begun. In the clubhouse, Coach Jedele took Wally aside and made another examination of the bruise on the team captain's head.

"Feel any pain now?" he asked sharply.

"No, sir . . . nothing except a dull throb."

"Hmmm! Looks like it's coming along all right. When you get home apply some hot and cold compresses. That'll take the swelling down."

"Yes, sir."

Wally started to move away. Fellow players, in various states of dressing, eyed him curiously.

"Just a minute, son!"

Coach Jedele was not through . . . and it was Wally's sensing that he was not through which had caused him to want to get away. The coach lowered his voice as the star player hesitated.

"What was the matter with you that last time up?"

Wally started, giving the coach a searching glance.

"Why—why—nothing. I—I just . . ."

"You just pulled away from the plate on every pitch," said the coach, bluntly. "You can't hit that old apple unless you step into it. You know that. You didn't let that bird get

your goat just because he beaned you, did you?"

Wally fidgeted uneasily.

"No, sir!" he answered, with a flash of scorn. "I should say not!"

Coach Jedele's eyes narrowed. He slapped his star player on the back.

"All right. Get under a shower. And take it easy over the week-end. It's up to you to keep in trim. We're going to need that club of yours good and plenty before the season's over!"

Wally grabbed a towel, smiling relievedly.

"Don't worry. I'll produce!" he assured, disappearing into the shower room.

The coach rubbed a finger over his chin, thoughtfully. Then he turned to the other players and said in a voice of commanding sternness: "I don't want to catch any of you fellows making any cracks about Wally's striking out that last time up, understand? He feels bad enough about it, as it is. Help him to forget it!"

Team-mates looked at one another significantly and nodded their heads. They had sur-

mised that their captain was facing a crisis . . . that he was up against the toughest of fights . . . the battle to regain lost nerve. And each somehow sensed that Baldwin's hopes for another much coveted conquest over Preston City would be governed largely on the manner in which Wally would be able to meet this new manace to his playing ability.

"A bad break!" Eagle confided to Harve. "Easy to see Wally's greatly upset. But, of course, he won't admit it to anybody."

"Can you blame him?" rejoined Cody, sympathetically. "Gee, I sure hope he doesn't let it get him. If he goes to pieces now . . .!"

Baldwin High's ex-captain shook his head with the look of one who did not even care to consider the suggestion.

CHAPTER XIII

A MISERABLE SHOWING

WALLY'S batting practice the following Monday afternoon was watched with great interest by players and spectators alike. He had seemingly completely recovered from his injury. The first time up, Baldwin's star batter hit a ball which was close in, stepping back from the plate to clout it—sending the ball on a line to center for what would have been an easy double.

"Good boy, Wally!" complimented Harve, next in line.

But Coach Jedele frowned.

"Take another!" he called from the bench. "You should have passed that one up. Make 'em be good!"

The Baldwin captain stepped back into the batter's box with a peeved expression on his face. Imagine getting bawled out for a clean hit like that.

Dan Cort, relief pitcher, who was serving them up for the Baldwin first string hitters, grinned from the mound.

"All right, Wally. We'll have to satisfy the old gent. I'll lay one right in there for you this time!"

He started a wind-up. The ball burned across the plate, just below the shoulder, a beautiful strike.

Wally stepped one foot to the side, leaned away, then swung—tardily. He ticked the ball for a foul.

"Get out of there!" yelled Cody. "Two's all you get. I'm up!"

"Take another!" ordered Coach Jedele from the bench.

"Made to order," promised Cort, stooping over to rub his hand in the dust of the pitcher's box.

Wally dug his toes into the worn holes on the side of the plate nearest first base. He knew he was drawing back . . . as everyone else knew. And he was trying to break himself . . . trying desperately. What

had gotten hold of him? He had never experienced such a feeling before.

Again the ball started toward the plate . . . nothing on it . . . just fast and straight . . . right over the middle. Wally held to his footing until the last . . . even made an effort to step forward to meet the horsehide . . . but, as he stepped, the foot wandered to the side involuntarily. And when Wally swung, off balance, he missed the ball utterly.

An unkind spectator laughed. The star batsman looked toward the bench appealingly. Coach Jedele waved him away. Dejectedly Wally took his place at the end of the line. Dejectedly he watched Harve Cody go to the plate after him and meet the ball smack on the nose, lacing it to deep right for what would have been a sure three-bagger.

"That's the way to do it!" kidded Harve, as he came back to the line.

But Wally wasn't in the mood to josh or be joshed.

In seven times at bat after that, Baldwin's supposed heavy hitter only hit the ball out of

the infield once . . . and this was a high fly which any fielder could have gobbled. Twice he hit long fouls which, the coach observed, if Wally had been using his normal swing, would have gone fair for sizable smashes. The other times Wally managed to connect for weak infield taps. As his dismal batting exhibition strung out through the practice session, a kind of gloom began to settle over the field. It was a sight that no one really cared to see . . . especially as the ailment seemed to be growing worse instead of better. It was noted that, each time, Wally appeared to set himself more firmly at the plate . . . as though determined to stand up to the ball . . . and, each time, his nerve or something gave way . . .

That night the news traveled over Baldwin by word of mouth that Baldwin's star player was done. The bean ball had ruined him. Eyewitnesses recounted the batsman's pathetic attempt to come back . . . to face the pitcher . . . to overcome the gripping fear. And then someone suddenly remembered how, one time last winter when Coach Jedele

was sitting with a group around the stove in Sam Johnson's general store, he had said: "Once a man gets plunked in the head with a baseball he's never the same afterwards. It takes something out of him he can't ever put back. I've seen three promising hitters get beaned in my time . . . and they didn't even last the season out. They were shipped back to the minors and it wasn't very long until they were through there, too!"

Such a recollection was far from reassuring to the sporting blood of Baldwin. Wally Coburn had been the town idol for the past three years and the town was not going to give him up without a struggle. Especially when the Baldwin captain was being counted on so heavily to carry the brunt of the attack against Preston City. Imagine Baldwin taking on the state champions without Wally in the line-up. Her ardent hopes of victory were tied up mainly in two players—Southy Baker, pitcher, and Wally Coburn, batter. What these two Baldwinites would do to Preston City when the two teams met, had been freely prophesied. But now . . .?

The following Saturday found Baldwin High journeying to Dexter, and Wally, despite a poor showing all week, still batting in his accustomed place as clean-up hitter. But Wally cleaned up nothing in the Dexter game, although he had two glistening chances with men perched on every base. It was Lou Perry, fifth in the batting order, who delivered the goods on both occasions . . . a single the first time, scoring two . . . and a long double the second . . . driving in three. Wally, before him, had tapped to pitcher on his first opportunity and fouled to catcher on the next. Going into the first of the ninth with the game under their belts, 8 to 3, Wally scratched a hit to short, beating the throw by a hair decision. So he saved a goose egg batting average for the day with a lonely bingle in five trips to the plate. But a sadder player never walked off the field. There was no reproof to greet him from either players or coach. Instead, they reflected his sadness. The usual rejoicing over a victory was missing. Wally dressed in a corner, by himself. Some of his team-mates looked his way as though they would like to

offer some manner of consolation. But all appeared embarrassed for want of what to say.

Harve Cody was the last to leave the locker room, except Wally. He had purposely stayed behind and, as he passed his chum, Wally suddenly reached out a restraining arm and clutched him by the sleeve.

"Excuse me, Harve. In a hurry?"

There was a tremulous appeal in Wally's voice. Cody looked down at his captain, sympathetically.

"Why, no . . . not particularly. What's up?"

He dropped down beside the right fielder.

Wally put a hand on Cody's knee and picked at the crease of Cody's trouser leg, nervously.

"Harve . . . I . . . I'm rotten!"

The catcher eyed Wally queerly.

"No, you're just a little off your eye," he said, in an attempt to soothe. "You'll get it back."

The Baldwin captain bit his lips, and moisture formed in his eyes as he shook his head.

"No, I won't . . . not unless . . ." Wally put hands to his face convulsively. "Oh,

Harve . . . I'm scared! Scared sick! That's what's the matter with me. Every time I go up to the plate . . . just when I face a pitcher is bad enough . . . but when he throws the ball . . . I—I just break out in a cold sweat!"

The once leading batsman of the Baldwin High team gripped his fellow player's arm in terror at the thought. Cody looked off into space, helplessly.

"I've got to do something," Wally continued desperately. "I can't go on this way. I shouldn't have played today. Anybody else but me would have been yanked!"

Still Cody looked off into space. It seemed cruel, standing by, unable to be of comfort and without an idea as to how the Baldwin captain might get a grip on himself.

"Gee, Wally . . ." Harve said, finally, "I'd give my left arm if I could do something for you . . . but I can't . . ."

A sudden, hopeful gleam came into the star player's eyes. He leaped to his feet with the impulsiveness of the thought.

"Yes you *can!*" he exclaimed. "But you

won't have to give your *left* arm. It's your *right* arm *I* want! You gave me a hunch when you said that—a big hunch!"

Wally all but embraced the bewildered catcher in the fervor of his excitement.

"How about coming out to the diamond half an hour early every afternoon . . . and . . . and pitching to me? Throwing 'em at my head till I . . . till I get over it!"

Cody stared at his captain as though he had not heard aright. The fellow must be crazy.

"I mean it!" insisted Wally. "It's the only way I'll ever break myself. You've got lots of steam. I'll tell the world—the way you peg to second! Well, how many times do you think you could hit me in the head out of ten?"

"Say, Wally—honest, you're not daffy?"

The Baldwin catcher took hold of his teammate and shook him.

"Of course I'm not. It's my only chance . . . and I've got to play it!"

"But—but I might kill you!" protested Cody in alarm.

"Nope . . . not at first, anyway," assured Wally. "You see I'm going to wear my football headpiece . . ."

"Oh, I see . . ." Cody considered. "Well . . ."

"Then, when I get to swinging right again . . . I'm going to take it off . . . and see what happens."

There was no resisting the gameness in Wally's eyes. Cody knew in that moment that the Baldwin captain was not yellow . . . far from it. Other folks might have figured him out that way but you couldn't label a fellow a coward who was willing to fight what he feared.

"All right, Wally . . . my old right wing is yours," agreed Cody, grasping his captain's hand. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow afternoon at three-thirty?"

"Suits me."

"The gates aren't open till four, you know . . . and the other boys aren't out till around four-fifteen. That gives us almost three-quarters of an hour alone."

The two players moved out of the clubhouse

together. As they parted, an afterthought occurred to Wally. He called Cody back.

"By the way, Harve . . . . please don't mention this to a soul. I—I'd hate for this to get out . . ." The Baldwin captain looked self-conscious and a bit ashamed.

"Trust me," rejoined Cody. "I'll keep it as mum as though I didn't know anything about it myself!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIGHT TO OVERCOME

It is doubtful if the old Baldwin Ball Park, rechristened Emerson Field, ever witnessed a stranger spectacle than the one which took place within its grassy confines on the following afternoon. Two figures in familiar baseball uniform . . . one occupying the pitcher's slab and the other the batter's box . . . the former exhibiting a consistent tendency for wildness which kept the latter dodging first one way, then another, and sometimes flattening himself upon the ground. Occasionally there was a dull thump as the ball connected with some part of the batter's anatomy and once there was a sharper crack as the horsehide collided with a leather helmet.

"Ha! That's the time I got you!" shouted Cody, triumphantly. "Gee, you've got a hard head to hit! I don't know, though. Maybe

everybody's head is hard to hit. Yours is the first one I've ever tried. Hurt you?"

"Naw, never felt it," answered Wally. "Gave me a funny feeling, just the same . . . sort of weak feeling . . . down here." He motioned to his stomach.

"The main thing is—you didn't step back . . . not an inch . . . you stood up and took it!" complimented Cody.

"Oh, I ducked all right," confessed the Baldwin captain, nervously. "But I tried to go after the ball . . . until I saw it was going to be a beaner!"

"Say, this is kind of fun," admitted Cody. "For me—at any rate. Reminds me of the time I tried to hit that colored man who had his head stuck through a piece of canvas at the county fair. Remember?"

Wally shook his head, grinning. "Come on. Serve up some more. This isn't exactly my idea of sport but I'll try to keep you amused if I can just get back my batting form!"

All that week these private practice sessions kept up. Some of the players fell to wonder-

ing a little why Harve and Wally always seemed to be the first ones at the clubhouse but apparently no one had gotten wise to the real reason.

On Friday, after ten minutes of batting against Cody's bean balls, Wally undid the strap fastening his football helmet and tossed the headgear to one side.

"All right, Harve," he called grimly. "Let's try it this way."

The Baldwin catcher's face sobered. He had grown accustomed to whizzing balls in the direction of the plate, some of them deliberately at his chum's head, but not when Wally's head was uncovered. The thought of doing this now sent cold shivers down his spine. A bean ball, if it should strike just right, could easily fracture a fellow's skull. Harve hesitated.

"Let her fly!" encouraged Wally, made uneasy by the wait. "Don't worry about me. I'm looking out for myself!"

Harve raised his arm, sighting the plate carefully. Wally was posed, set for the pitch, as tense as though a championship hung in the balance.

"Here she is!" called the Baldwin catcher as his arm flashed downward, releasing the ball.

Cody elected to make a strike of the pitch and his control was perfect. But Wally, fighting the mental hazard which gripped him, pulled back instinctively before swinging. The result was a high foul which disappeared over the roof of the grandstand.

"Darn!" he groaned.

To think that last season he had deliberately slumped in batting in an effort to show fellow team-mates how valuable he was to the team, and now, when he wanted most to keep up his heavy hitting, this thing had come along to baffle him!

"I'm probably getting paid back in my own coin," Wally thought to himself, despondently. "Here I get a hold on myself when it comes to temper and being jealous. And I just get to figuring that there's easy sailing ahead, when this has to happen. Believe me, too, this is the toughest thing to overcome I've ever run into!"

The realization of how much fellow team-

mates looked up to him and the speculation as to what effect his startling slump might have on their play, only added to Wally's torture. He had promised that he would give them everything he had . . . a something which he could not do unless he could get the upper hand of this terrorizing monster—fear.

"Some more!" invited Wally, perspiration standing out upon his forehead. "Keep 'em coming, Harve. Mix 'em up! And let me have some—right at my head!"

Cody nodded, thinking uneasily to himself, "This thing's getting pretty near as hard on me as it is on him!"

Three more pitches whizzed across the plate, good strike balls, only one of which Wally hit, and that for a soft bounder in the direction of third.

"Atta boy!" Cody called, encouragingly, only to mutter to himself: "No better! Pulling away on every one. I hate to think what he'll do when I soak the ball right at him!"

Winding up slowly, taking careful aim, Cody obligingly hurled the next ball directly

at Wally's head. He moistened his lips anxiously as he watched its flight.

Having undergone the agony of anticipating a bean ball on every pitch, Wally's expectancy had gradually been deadened as Cody had continued to pitch strikes. So the beaner was more of a surprise as Baldwin's star batter, chagrined at having failed to land solidly against the horsehide, crowded the plate with the determination of hitting the next pitch on the nose.

"Oh!"

Wild-eyed, an expression of horror on his face, Wally ducked quickly, sinking to his knees. The ball, grazing his head, clipped his cap off.

"There! How's that?" grinned Cody, hoping that Wally had not seen how concerned he was.

"Good shot!" complimented the Baldwin captain, shakily, picking himself up. "That's the stuff, Harve! A few more of those now. That's what I need."

But Wally, on resuming his position at the plate, was a good foot back from his usual

stand. And his arms shook so that their trembling was perceptible to Cody on the mound.

"How do you feel?" asked Harve, uncertainly.

"Fine!" answered the batter.

"Yes," thought Cody, as he prepared to make another pitch. "So fine that he's about ready for smelling salts! But he's sure standing up there and trying to take it!"

The next half dozen pitches cut the plate. Three of them Wally let go by, stepping back even farther from the pan. Two pitches he missed entirely and the other was hit for a pop-fly over second, which would have been an easy out.

Despairingly Wally reclaimed his headgear.

"I guess I wasn't quite ready to take this off," he said, lamely.

Cody said nothing but continued his task and noted that a large measure of Wally's confidence immediately returned. Baldwin's star player toed the plate and whaled out three long drives, grinning in relief.

"Say, Wally, I've an idea," Harve called.

finally. "There isn't any law against your wearing that helmet in a game, is there?"

The Baldwin captain shook his head.

"N-no, I guess not."

"I was just thinking about the game tomorrow," suggested Cody. "And that you . . ." He didn't have the heart to finish.

"I know," admitted Wally, miserably. "But I couldn't wear this . . . I'd be cheating that way . . . cheating myself . . . I couldn't!"

The game Saturday was with Mackland, on Baldwin's home grounds. Mackland was the team which it had taken Baldwin ten innings to defeat last season, and Mackland was extremely desirous of turning the tables this time. Consequently this was a game which Coach Jedele intended that Baldwin should take seriously! Just how seriously was indicated by a shocking change in the line-up. The populace of Baldwin gasped as their team took the field with substitute outfielder, Pat Reynolds, going to right in place of Captain Wally Coburn!

The removal of Baldwin's star player unbridled tongues and set them to wagging strenuously. Everyone started feverishly to tell everybody else what he knew about the matter . . . and a little bit more. The "I told you so's" would have run into several thousand at least, had any person been disposed as to count them. "Didn't I tell you he was through?" would have run a close second. Over on the bench an extremely unhappy fellow sat, head in hands, following the game, dumbly. He was conscious of what was being said about him and was forced, reluctantly, to confess that it was just about true.

Mackland furnished excellent opposition until the latter innings, the game proving almost a duplicate of last season's encounter except that it did not go over-innings. The visitors were ahead, 4 to 3, until the last of the eighth, when Baldwin bats got busy and pounded out three runs to put the home team in front, 6 to 4, where the score remained to the finish. But it was interesting to note, in checking up, that it had been the substitute right fielder's one base blow which had given Baldwin her margin

of victory. Coach Jedele's wisdom in jerking Wally was therefore extolled. Oh, fickle baseball public! You must be fed on triumphs and with Wally in . . . your former idol . . . you were willing to deduce that Baldwin might have lost!

If the truth were known, the Baldwin captain was actually grateful to the coach for having kept him out of the game. Wally was keen enough to realize that, in his present plight, he would have been worse than useless. He did not care to return to the team in a regular contest until he felt reasonably certain of conducting himself creditably. Beyond the detriment to the team there was the deep humiliation to him. But Wally was glad that the coach continued to use him on the team during pratice sessions. It showed that the former big leaguer had not given him up entirely. He was at least granting Wally a chance . . . and, under the circumstances, Wally thought this mighty fair treatment.

Another week of patient, bruising workouts. Wally had black and blue spots on various

parts of his body where Cody's pitches had landed. He did not mind these so much. It was his head that continued to bother him. His head!

Came the game with Dudley, away from home, and Baldwin carried into her first extra inning battle of the year. Harve Cody's screaming double broke this contest up in the eleventh for a 3 to 2 victory. When the catcher returned to the bench to put on his togs for the last half of this inning, Wally said, "Great stuff, Harve! There was a time when *I* could have done that, too!"

"Cheer up, old scout!" the Baldwin catcher replied, as he grabbed a drink from the water bucket. "That time's coming again . . . and coming soon. You're getting better—I'm not kidding you!"

Wally, however, shook his head, almost with a trace of hopelessness.

CHAPTER XV

COACH JEDELE LENDS A HAND

TIME hurried along to the week before the Preston City game, with the town of Baldwin more than agog with excitement. The home team had gone through the season undefeated thus far and Preston City had likewise piled up an imposing record on her way toward a state championship. From all indications the Baldwin-Preston City battle was going to be a contest worth traveling miles to see. It was rumored that at least a thousand fans were coming from Preston City on a special train to repay the Baldwin rooters' compliment of last year. Baldwin merchants began to plan ways of dressing up their stores and hanging out buntings. Next Saturday was to be the occasion of occasions! The sporting eyes of the state would be upon Baldwin that day.

"And they must not find us wanting," de-

clared a town wit, "except *wanting* to win the game!"

Wednesday afternoon of the all-important week, Coach Jedele arrived at the ball park a good fifteen minutes early. He had a number of little matters he wished to attend to, one of them being the figuring of extra seating arrangements for the big game. As he entered the clubhouse he heard the sound of a baseball crashing up against the wire backstop . . . then voices. He stepped to the door, opened it, and started in surprise.

"Well, I'll be caught off first," he said finally. "The kid's got sand . . . and plenty of it!"

How long Coach Jedele had been watching them, Harve and Wally did not know. Both had been too absorbed in what they were doing to have noticed the moment of his approach. Wally had been practicing without his headgear again . . . and this meant that the battle was on in earnest. The Baldwin captain had progressed to the halfway stage. Sometimes he did and sometimes he didn't.

The times that he did, Wally was wonderfully discouraged; the times that he didn't, Wally picked up hope . . . a practically forlorn hope now.

"I—I guess it simply isn't any use," he had just finished saying to Cody, when he suddenly became conscious that the coach was standing by.

"Getting in a few extra licks, eh?" the former big leaguer smiled, approvingly. "Well, what *you* need is a *real pitcher!*"

Cody grimaced from the mound, rubbing a grimy hand across his perspiring forehead.

"Here, Cody—you get behind the plate where you belong," directed Coach Jedele, gingerly. "I'll toss a few Wally's way!"

The Baldwin captain's face went white. He gulped hard several times . . . acted as though he were going to protest . . . but fought the inclination down. Coach Jedele took his position in the pitcher's box while Cody adjusted himself at the plate, eying Wally carefully.

"I haven't done much with my old soup bone for some years," apologized the coach.

"So she may be a trifle wild. However, you don't care for a little thing like that, do you?"

Wally forced a smile. He was trembling all over. This was unusual, for the coach to volunteer to throw a ball. He had told the boys that he had pitched his arm out . . . that he was taking a chance using it any more . . . and here he was . . .!

"Just a couple to warm up," said the old-time pitching star.

Wally stood back from the plate respectfully. At first the coach merely looped the ball to Cody. Then he gradually brought more power behind his wing . . . so much power that Wally gasped in amazement. But twice Cody was forced to leap madly to one side to stop the ball. The pitcher had no more control than a runaway balloon. And, as Wally noted this, his heart began to pound.

"All right, batter up!" called the coach, pleasantly. "Ah, it's Babe Ruth approaching the platter! Well, Cody, what'll we give him?"

The Baldwin catcher gave a regular signal

and smiled behind his mask. But to Wally he said: "I'm helping you, old scout. This is to be a straight one, over the outside corner."

The Baldwin captain took a firmer hold of his bat. His attitude was one of uncertainty . . . and fear . . . but, with it all, a grim resolve.

Sure enough! A straight one . . . hard and fast . . . over the outside corner. Wally let it go by.

"What did I tell you?" asked Cody, in a low voice.

Wally made no answer . . . but he pulled his cap farther down to shade his eyes . . . and crowded the plate determinedly.

"Here comes one—right over the middle!" informed Cody.

But it wasn't. It was a beaner . . . and Wally, who had stepped forward to meet the ball, barely escaped by a frantic jump to the side. He picked himself up to glare savagely at the grinning Cody.

"See—that didn't hurt you!"

"Pardon me!" called Coach Jedele, from the mound. "I sure lost control of that one!"

Cody tossed the ball back ready for the next pitch and smacked a fist into his mitt.

"Say—what are you two trying to pull off?" demanded Wally, suspiciously, looking hard at the Baldwin catcher.

"Pull off?" repeated Cody, with perfectly mocked innocence, "Why, nothing! I can't help it if he . . . Look out—another wild one!"

The Baldwin captain stiffened but stood his ground. As the ball left Coach Jedele's hand, Wally leaned toward it, jaws set tightly . . . The pitch was not wild . . . waist high . . . and right over the middle.

Crack!

Far down the right field foul line, and in fair territory, a whizzing object kicked up a puff of dust as it struck the earth. Simultaneously with this, the Baldwin catcher, tearing off his mask, danced up to the plate and embraced the Baldwin right fielder, joyously.

"Great stuff, Wally!" he cried. "You've got *it* licked!"

The former big leaguer strode in from the mound, rubbing the muscles of his arm, a glad-

some twinkle in his eyes. He held out his hand. Wally took it, quite speechless, but his face glowing with the old confidence. There were little drying beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Congratulations, son," said the coach, sincerely. "You start the Preston City game!"

CHAPTER XVI

A CALL FOR COURAGE

It was not until the Baldwin team trotted onto the diamond for its short practice before the contest which sporting authorities claimed would decide the state championship, that home town fans learned of Captain Wally Coburn's return to the line-up. For a moment the Baldwin crowd sat in astonished silence, watching their former idol jog to his position in right field. Then there burst forth a happy volley of sound . . . tumultuous applause . . . cheering which caused the thousand or so Preston City fans to wonder not a little. To Baldwin, Wally's return was regarded with almost the acclaim of victory. Morale went shooting sky-high. It was accepted at once that the team captain had recovered, else Coach Jedele would never have made this eleventh hour change.

"*Good day,* Preston!" shouted a Baldwin rooter, confidently.

When game time arrived it was hardly conceivable how another human being could have been crammed into the old Baldwin Ball Park. That is, and have permitted the playing of a ball game! As it was, the crowd overflowed upon the field, being seated on two tiers in front of the lower stands. There were many folks present from distant points who had followed the destinies of high-school baseball teams throughout the season and who had journeyed all the way to Baldwin, anticipating the hottest of clashes. It had seemed, also, as if in the last few days the state had been pulling for Baldwin to win. Telegrams of good wishes had come in from various school nines, saying in substance, "Here's hoping you wallop Preston. We couldn't!" The mighty Preston City aggregation had ruled the roost long enough. Let the new champion keep her crown . . . if she could!

Baldwin took the field first amid the wildest of demonstrations. From the first pitch it was evident that Southpaw Baker, home town hurl-

ing ace, was in the rarest of form. He struck out the Preston City lead-off man on four pitched balls; caused the second batter to tap a slow roller in front of the plate which Harve Cody pounced upon and whistled down to first for the put-out; then forced the third hitter to raise a weak pop-fly which was gathered in by Matt Scudder at short. The Baldwin pitcher strode to the bench with the cheers of the populace ringing in his ears. Preston City had been given a preliminary taste of Baldwin's defensive power . . . Now, how strong was the home team on offense?

Rex Lathrop, Preston City twirler, had attained renown as the state's leading high-school pitcher. He was noted for his "world of speed." Newspaper scribes had lauded him from time to time as a "second Walter Johnson." Lathrop had won eight games this year against the strongest of teams, four of the contests having resulted in shut-outs.

"Wait him out!" ordered Coach Jedele of Chic Redman, Baldwin's lead-off batter.

This Chic proceeded to do in perfectly tantalizing fashion, spoiling the good ones by well-

placed fouls in the stands. Of course Chic would have liked to straighten out one of those balls . . . but then, fouls were just as good, in a sense, for he was thus enabled to work the count up to three and two.

At the next pitch, Chic tossed aside his bat and trotted down toward first. The umpire's voice boomed after him.

"Ball four!"

What do you know about that? Chic had worked the great Lathrop for a walk!

The next Baldwin batter did what most batters do in a case like this—he bunted. Chic's long legs carried him to second with express-train speed. Matt Scudder, who made the sacrifice, died very gladly at first. Baldwin rooters set up a clamor. A man on second and only one man down. Good chance for a run. Eagle Carver up . . . a dependable clouter. Watch out!

But Eagle, overanxious, topped the ball and sent it bounding down to short. The shortstop fielded the hit cleanly, held the runner at second close to his bag, and pegged to first just in time

to retire the Baldwin center fielder by a safe margin.

Two down and a man on second in the last half of the first inning. And—Captain Wally Coburn up!

On the Baldwin bench, every player—regulars and substitutes alike—leaned forward expectantly . . . anxiously . . . What would their team captain do, his first time at bat? A little single could score the fast Chic from second. An early break of a run would mean much to Baldwin.

There was no hesitancy or trace of fear in Wally's eyes as he stepped into the batter's box. This was an opportunity he relished and he intended to make the most of it.

He did! Wally met the first ball pitched, a dazzling speeder. The crowd was on its feet at the crack of the bat . . . in right field a frantic fielder raced backward, reaching up a gloved hand. It was really laughable, as the drive passed twenty feet above his head. He couldn't have caught it in an aëroplane. A thunderous roar broke out as the ball sailed

in a rising line and disappeared into the crowd in the right field stand.

The umpire waved Baldwin's star batsman around the bases. Wally had come into his own. What a moment he had taken to redeem himself! And now, because of his mighty swat, Baldwin was staked to a two run lead on the powerful Preston City nine . . . a big lead if Southy Baker kept up the same brand of pitching he had flashed.

"Good day, Preston!" reiterated the Baldwin fan. "What did I tell you? There goes your old ball game!"

But Preston City was too veteran a ball team to be more than temporarily chagrined at what had happened. And Rex Lathrop was too good a pitcher to allow one circuit smash to upset him. To show his contempt for the opposition, he proceeded to strike out Lou Perry, the batter not so much as ticking the ball on three lusty swings.

Baldwin took the field for the beginning of the second inning—a dashing, fighting nine—inspired by their captain. And Wally himself knew a happiness he had never before ex-

perienced. It seemed as though he had been struggling against something for months and months, and at last he had come out on top. Eagle grinned at him cheerily from center field.

"Good boy, Wally, old war horse!"

And Harve, on Southy's last warm-up pitch, instead of making the customary throw to second base, gave evidence of his elation by pegging the ball out to Baldwin High's captain. Wally returned the ball on a line to Lou at second and Lou tossed it to Southy.

"We're all hot today, gang!" cried Lou. "We'll take 'em for you, Southy! Let the babies hit!"

For five innings the home team held the 2 to 0 lead . . . five innings in which Southpaw Baker allowed but two scratch hits. What a ball game he was pitching! And Lathrop, too! Baldwin had touched him for only four safeties, three of them singles, all scattered.

But in the sixth Preston City grew desperate and pushed two runs across to tie the score. Two one-base blows in succession, a sacrifice which moved the runners to second and third, a double steal which caught the Baldwin de-

fense napping and scored one run, then a short two-bagger which brought in the man from third—this was how the former champions got to Southy Baker and evened the count.

Every trip to the plate since the first time up, Baldwin's star batter was entreated to hit another homer. But homers apparently were not as contagious as the measles . . . nor did they come in bunches. Lathrop evidently treated the drive as an accident, for he appeared not the least concerned in pitching to Baldwin's heavy hitter. Wally was retired twice on infield outs, though both times he connected with the ball squarely.

And so the first of the ninth opened with the teams deadlocked, facing the possibility of an overtime game. There were two men down for Preston City. Rex Lathrop, the pitcher, up. Pitchers are never supposed to hit. But perhaps Lathrop had grown somewhat irritable, having Baldwin threaten him so dangerously. Perhaps, also, Southy Baker had grown a trifle careless, figuring that Lathrop was going to oblige by striking out. At any rate, the Preston City pitcher decided to win his own

game by duplicating Wally's stunt. The only difference was, he punched the ball into the left field stands instead of the right. And the thousand or so rooters who had journeyed by special train to Baldwin to see their favorites squelch Baldwin, immediately multiplied themselves into five times that number, if one were to judge by sound.

It was sad . . . watching Lathrop circle the bases . . . taking his own sweet time for the purpose of rubbing it in. Helping himself to a one run advantage at this stage of the game was the same as cinching the contest. Just maybe his name wouldn't appear in the headlines the next morning: "Pitcher Wins His Own Game," "Great Twirlers' Battle Won by Lathrop," and any other titles you wanted to figure out. Or, better still, "Preston Wins Back Championship from Rival!"

On the Baldwin bench, as her players came in for their last bats, the situation was exceedingly tense. It was Southy Baker's time up, but the crestfallen pitcher pulled on his sweater, knowing full well that his work for

the day was done. Someone would be sent in to hit for him.

"Come on, gang, get that run back!" he pleaded.

The Preston City crowd began a premature celebration of victory, howling madly as Rex Lathrop took his position on the mound to retire the last three Baldwin batters.

"Only three more, Rex, old boy!" sang out an admirer. "That's pie for you!"

The state's leading high-school pitcher smiled broadly and shot over a few warm-up pitches at blinding speed. Worlds of reserve left!

"Reynolds!" snapped Coach Jedele.

Pat Reynolds, who had substituted for Wally during the team captain's slump, jumped eagerly to his feet.

"Yes, sir?"

"You're at bat!"

Mascot Squint Pickens handed Pat his stick, with team-mates wildly beseeching him . . . and slapping him on the back.

"Get on, Pat. We'll bring you home!"

The Baldwin crowd gave Reynolds all the

encouragement possible, too. If he could only . . .!

Lathrop, working carefully, brought the count to two and two. Then he curved over a beautiful drop, calculated to fool the pinch hitter. But Reynolds had a fondness for such balls and spanked this one down the third base line. It hopped over the bag into left field and the Baldwin stands arose with renewed hope. The top of the batting order up, no one down, and a man on first. This old ball game wasn't lost yet!

Chic, not so fortunate this time, failed in an attempted sacrifice, bunting a foul which the Preston City catcher smothered gleefully.

One down and a man still on first, the last half of the ninth and Preston City leading, 3 to 2.

"Take your time, Rex," barked the Preston City infield. "Only two more!"

Shortstop Matt Scudder at the bat. He had a single to his credit against the great Lathrop. If he could only produce again! But Lathrop, bearing down with his Walter Johnson speed, whiffed Matt for the second out. Reynolds

crouched pathetically on the first base bag, looking as stranded as though someone had shipped him to a desert isle.

"You didn't think you were going anywhere, did you?" a Preston City fan kidded.

Eagle Carver up. A dismal silence fell over the field. Baldwin hope was dying. Behind Eagle, swinging three bats and worked up almost into a frenzy, was the Baldwin captain.

"Save me a bat, Eagle. That's all I ask—just save me a bat!"

As if getting Wally's throbbing thought, the Baldwin crowd echoed it in a great, surging plea.

"Save Wally a bat! Save Wally a bat!"

But pitcher Lathrop had no idea of letting Wally face him again. He was going to end the game right here. Lathrop let loose a fast inshoot.

It looked like a perfect ball to hit and Eagle stepped forward to meet it. The ball was coming shoulder high. Eagle liked 'em around that region. But this one took a sharp break at the last moment. The Baldwin center fielder,

instead of swinging, lurched to the side and ducked his head.

There was the sickening crack as ball met skull . . . and the batsman dropped in his tracks. The Preston City catcher . . . and Wally . . . helped pick Eagle up. He was muttering to himself and rocking his head in pain. Team-mates came running out from the bench together with Coach Jedele. The stands were in an uproar. A hurried examination and Miller, a substitute, was sent in to run for Eagle. As the former Baldwin captain was led away to the bench, he looked back over his shoulder and grinned weakly at Wally.

"I saved you a bat all right," he said. "Let's see you kill it!"

Men on first and second, two men out, the last half of the ninth, Baldwin one run behind . . . and the game hanging in the balance!

Baldwin rooters rose to their feet *en masse* as their star batsman stepped into the batter's box.

"Home run, Wally!" screeched the stands. "You can do it!"

The popular cry . . . but a vain cry

now. Just how vain the crowd did not, at that moment, realize. For the idol of Baldwin was scared stiff! His knees were trembling, little prickles of sweat stood out upon his forehead . . . he was standing up to the plate only on sheer nerve. He didn't want to bat now. He wanted to get away . . . anywhere . . . just so it wasn't facing a pitcher. Dazedly Baldwin's star batter saw the great Lathrop raise his arm . . . saw a white object come shooting down toward him. He jumped away from the plate.

"Strike one!" bellowed the umpire.

Coach Jedele slumped down upon the bench, hanging his head.

"It's all over," he said.

A telltale murmur ran through the stands. Wally, hearing it, knew that he was being condemned . . . but, with it all, he felt pitifully helpless. That awful, sickening crack of ball against skull . . . the ugly lump on Eagle's head . . . no, *his* head! . . . no, *Eagle's* head . . .! And Harve Cody yelling something at him from the third base coach line.

Another pitch. He swung wildly. The ball smacked into the catcher's mitt. A groan of protest sounded out over the field. The ball had been six inches off the outside corner of the plate! The Baldwin captain stepped out of the batter's box and made an excuse of tying his shoe in an attempt to get a grip on himself. But his fingers shook so that he could scarcely grasp the strings.

"Quit stalling!" ordered the umpire, mercilessly. "Play ball!"

Two strikes and no balls and two men out!

"Make 'em be good!" pleaded Cody.

Wally let the next one go by, his heart pounding as he did so. Despairing of any help from the batter, the base runners dug for third and second respectively. The Preston City catcher did not even make a play for them. He returned the ball to Lathrop with a laugh.

Two strikes and one ball on the hitter. No use putting the ball over for the Baldwin batter when he would swing at bad ones. The next one was inside. It drove Wally from the plate but he struck at it . . . and ticked a foul into the stands. Agony prolonged!

Then, an unusual something happened. Harve Cody left the coacher's box and dashed down to the plate. Wally, seeing him, left the batter's box . . . surprised. Cody came up close to the Baldwin captain and, before anyone could stop him . . . or divine his intentions . . . he drew back his fist and struck Wally a blow over the left temple. The Baldwin captain staggered back, dropped his bat, and made for Cody in a rage. The crowd went mad, authorities restraining spectators with difficulty. Players ran out from both benches. Wally and Cody were kept apart . . . Cody being dragged away from the plate . . . the umpire ordering him from the field. But before the Baldwin catcher could be disposed of he had hurled angry words at his team's star batsman.

"You're not afraid of getting *beaned* with a fist, are you?"

The Baldwin captain stood staring, open-mouthed, until the fellow player who had assaulted him had disappeared within the dug-out. Then he turned back toward the plate, picking up his bat.

But his fingers did not tremble now. There was a grim gleam in his eyes. He crowded the plate and faced the great Lathrop defiantly.

"Ball two!"

The crowd, which had experienced more nerve-racking excitement in the past ten minutes than during the whole absorbing game, now burst into a pandemonium of yells. And, in that instant, the state's leading high-school pitcher knew that he had to pitch!

"Ball three!"

A tantalizing pitch, barely off the inside corner of the pan. A pitch which Lathrop had intended to make good, sending it in close with the hope of driving the batter back from the plate. Wally, however, had merely pulled in his chest to let the ball whiz by.

And now the next ball *had* to be good. Wally knew it . . . and Lathrop knew it. He prepared to put everything he had on that pitch. It was a time for blinding speed.

And here it was . . . a whizzing streak of darkened white! The flash of a bat . . . the crack, not of a ball meeting skull . . . but that of a ball meeting wood . . . the

shortstop leaping high into the air and coming down empty-handed . . . runners leaving their bases and racing for the plate . . . hats sailing onto the field from every direction . . . the left and center fielders running with their backs to the plates . . . and a batter rounding first . . . eyes on a smartly rolling ball . . .!

The tying run!

A few palpitating seconds . . . and Miller tearing in to home, running for the fellow who had been beaned . . . taking no chances . . . sliding!

A mighty cheer . . . the batter stopping at second, not needing to go farther. A scorekeeper chalking up the final score . . .

Baldwin, 4; Preston City, 3.

And a scene in the clubhouse following the game, with Wally shaking Harve Cody's hand and exclaiming happily:

"Harve, you old son-of-a-gun! It's *you* that did it!"

Cody smiled. "Well,—I just wanted you to see that lots of worse things could happen to you than being hit by pitcher . . ."

"Such as being hit by catcher, for instance," suggested Eagle, wittily, nursing a bandaged head.

It was here that Squint Pickens limped joyously in, his arms full of baseball paraphernalia. Dumping the stuff on the floor he leaped upon Wally's back, hugging him vigorously.

"Oh, papa!" he cried. "Didn't this guy supply a great ending to my career as mascot?"

"And not such a bad ending to his own career!" added someone else, huskily.

Then the realization that the Baldwin High team had retained its championship laurels suddenly dawned . . . and the roof almost left the clubhouse.

THE END

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